A TOUCH OF FATE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
Cora Reilly

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A Touch of Fate
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When Emma Mancini finds out the news of her impending arranged marriage to Samuel Mione, a future Underboss and one of the Outfit's most sought-after bachelors, she is hopeful for their future despite their age difference. However, the never-ending gossip surrounding their union and Samuel's cold attitude extinguish that hope.

After an unfortunate decision made in the past, guilt and bitterness are Samuel's constant companions. He doesn't have time for emotional nonsense, and a bond to a woman only adds another unwanted obligation.

Nevertheless, Emma isn't someone who resigns herself to her fate. She's overcome much greater obstacles than a cold husband determined to keep her at arm's length.

Can Emma break through Samuel's impenetrable walls? And if she does, can she live with what she discovers?

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PROLOGUE

11 years old

Beep. Beep.

Followed by wheezing.

I felt like I was surrounded by cotton.

My body was numb, almost like that one time I'd touched the glass of our fireplace and burned my fingers. For days, I hadn't felt anything in my fingertips. Now, my entire body felt like that, not just my skin. A numbness existed in almost every layer of my limbs, a thick fog of nothingness I didn't understand.

Beep. Beep.

Whoosh.

My hand felt heavy. I could feel *that*. It felt more substantial than the rest of me. My eyelids were crusted shut, and it took considerable effort to open them, but eventually, the darkness was replaced by a white wall. My eyes twitched to the left because my head felt too heavy to move. Mom sat on a chair beside me, her head rested on the mattress, and her hand held mine. That was the heavy feeling.

Where was I? What was going on?

My mouth and throat felt painfully dry. I tried to swallow, but something blocked my throat. My eyes flew open as panic set in. I wanted to scream, but my mouth was blocked too.

“Emma,” Mom said.

Our eyes met. Hers were filled with tears. I dragged my hand away from her, and even that movement was impossibly strenuous.

I reached for my face, wanting to rip away whatever stopped me from swallowing, from talking.

From screaming.

I touched a strange tube. Mom gripped my hand and gently pried it away. What was she doing? Why wasn’t she helping me?

“It’s okay,” she said, but her voice betrayed her words to be a lie. At the same time, she hit a button that started an alarm. It shrilled in my head, so painfully loud I wanted to cover my ears, but even that was impossible. A sound as unbearable as nails on a chalkboard. The little hairs on my neck rose, and even that small muscle movement hurt.

“This is your breathing tube, sweetheart. Don’t touch it. The nurse will be here soon to take it out.”

I didn’t understand what was going on. Nurse? My eyes took in my surroundings, the machine monitoring my heartbeat and pulse, the breathing machine, the drip. Mom squeezed my hand.

“Shhh,” she murmured. “Everything will be okay.”

But even as she said it, she began crying.

The door opened, and a nurse came in, followed by Dad and my brother, Danilo. All of them hurried to my side. The nurse began explaining what she’d do, but I barely listened. Dad stroked my hand, but his expression told me something bad had happened. And Danilo?

His face twisted with pain as if seeing me like this hurt him. His brown hair was completely disheveled as if he’d repeatedly run his fingers through it, and his white shirt was crinkled. *Crinkled.* The situation was dire if Danilo didn’t take care of his appearance.

I gagged when the nurse removed the tube, then coughed. My mouth had a stale taste, and my throat felt dry like I’d fallen asleep with my mouth wide open because my nose was closed up. But worse.

Mom handed me a glass of water and pushed a button so the backrest rose about halfway. I wanted to make it easier and sit up, but my body remained unresponsive. My muscles didn't obey my command. I wanted to push into a sitting position, but the cotton feeling still lingered in almost every part of my body except for my left arm, my throat, chest, and head.

Danilo and Dad exchanged a look that really scared me.

I cleared my throat, but my words were still stuck. I took another sip of the water, then tried again. "Wha…" I coughed.

"Drink," Mom encouraged, her hand shaking as she brought the glass to my lips again.

I shook my head. "What…hap…pe…pend."

Something bad had happened, and nobody was telling me anything.

Danilo finally stepped up to the bed while Dad sank onto the other chair with a shaky groan. He was ashen, and his brown hair looked as if it hadn't been washed in too long. Usually, he was the one we visited in the hospital. *He* was the one Mom cried over.

I frowned. Wasn't he in the hospital? I tried to remember, but my memories were murky.

Danilo touched my shoulder. I saw his fingertips resting against my shoulder, but the touch was distant as if the hospital gown was heavily padded.

I looked back up into his worried face.

"You were in a car accident. Do you remember?"

My brows puckered. I was at school…then I went home…no. I went to my dance. My biggest role so far. The dance went great. My bodyguard had taken me home because Mom had been in the hospital with Dad for his cancer surgery… and Danilo had to leave my play early.

I blinked at Danilo, confused. Then I glanced at Dad.

Mom had gone over to the window and was looking outside.

"You've been in a coma for a couple of weeks."

"I can't feel my body."

Dad closed his eyes, pinching the top of his nose.

Danilo sat on the chair that Mom had occupied before. He took my hand, but he didn't immediately start talking. When he did, his voice cracked several times. "You had to be cut out of the car, Emma. It was really bad. You suffered some damage to your spinal cord."

“Can I dance again?” I asked. I wasn’t even sure why it was the first thing I asked. I’d sometimes wanted to quit dancing because our teacher was never happy with me, but now, the idea of quitting ripped a hole in my chest.

Danilo shook his head. “No.”

“Nothing’s set in stone,” Mom said quickly.

Danilo shook his head. “It’s unlikely she’ll regain control of her legs again. Don’t give her false hope, Mom.”

False hope?

I tried to move my legs, tried to feel them, anything below my chest, and when I couldn’t, panic set in again.

Danilo’s grip on my hand tightened. “Emma, we’re here for you. You’re not alone. We’ll always take care of you.”

I closed my eyes. If I could have moved my hands, I would have covered my ears too. I didn’t want to hear or see any more. I didn’t even want to think. I just wanted to wake up from this nightmare and feel normal again.

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CHAPTER ONE

11 years old

I never walked without support again.

Things got better, though. Like Danilo had promised.

Within the first week of waking from my coma, I was able to move my arms, and the feeling returned to the upper part of my body. My arms felt weaker than before, but the doctors assured me they would regain their previous strength with training and as my body healed from the accident and surgeries. My lower body didn't recover the same way, no matter how much I wanted it to and how much Mom prayed. She always told me that it was temporary, and I believed her. I needed to believe her.

Once I felt strong enough, Danilo and a nurse helped me into a wheelchair. Mom started crying when she saw me in it and left the room with a muttered excuse. I peered up at my brother, who held on to the handles, his expression like stone. His eyes met mine, and he gave me a tight smile. "I don't want to be in a wheelchair, Danilo. I want to walk like I used to. I will walk again, right?"

Danilo stared at me for a long time, a muscle in his jaw twitching, the only movement in his otherwise frozen face. The nurse glanced between him and me, her brows pulling together. She touched my arm, and I looked into her kind blue eyes. “I know this is a lot to take in, Emma. And it’s a little scary, but a wheelchair isn’t your enemy. It’ll help you go wherever you want. There are wheelchairs for every activity. They are lightweight and agile. You can play sports with them and do a quick U-turn. You will be faster than your brother if you get the right wheelchair. And if you prefer more support, you can even get an electric wheelchair. Then you can steer it with a single finger. Isn’t that cool?”

I knew she was trying to cheer me up, to make my situation seem less daunting, but I didn’t want to know anything about wheelchairs. I wanted my legs to carry me wherever I needed to go. She squeezed my shoulder with a compassionate smile. “Once your arms are a little stronger, I’ll bring you one of our lightest wheelchairs so you can get used to it, okay?”

I gave a tiny nod. The moment she was out of the room, I sent my brother a pleading look. “I don’t want to get used to a wheelchair, Danilo. I want my legs. Please.”

Danilo walked around the chair and got on his haunches before me. He took my hands in his. “I’ll do everything I can, Emma, to help you. I’ll look for therapies and doctors worldwide who can help you, but I want you prepared. I want you to learn how to use a wheelchair, and I’ll buy you the best wheelchairs until you find one you like.”

I looked away from him. Why couldn’t he lie like Mom did? Why couldn’t he say that I would one day walk again?

I had trouble maneuvering the wheels. They seemed stuck. My fingers ached from trying to move them. This wheelchair wasn’t easy to steer. It wasn’t lightweight. “It doesn’t work!”

Tears of anger and frustration burned in my eyes after ten minutes of trying to move the light wheelchair the nurse had brought me for practice.

“I think you accidentally engaged the brakes.” She pulled a lever at the wheel, and I could move the wheelchair forward, but as I tried to move it past the bed, my wheel got stuck on one of the legs. I dropped my hands in my lap, pressing my lips together firmly.

Danilo leaned against the windowsill and watched everything with a stoic expression. Mom couldn’t bear seeing me in a wheelchair, so she had left for the canteen with her bodyguard.

“I need to go to the toilet,” I said tonelessly.

“Would you like me or your brother to help you? Maybe it would be good if he learned how to assist you until you can do it without help.”

My eyes widened in horror, and Danilo straightened with a look of shock, torn out of the controlled calm he always displayed around me. He quickly masked it and nodded slowly.

I shook my head. “No. I don’t want Danilo to help me.” My voice broke.

“Maybe your mother?”

Danilo’s mouth thinned.

“She won’t be able to handle it,” I said. Mom had to take care of Dad, which was already incredibly tough for her.

The nurse seemed at a loss. “Well, your family plans to take you home in a week, so we need to figure out how to help you.” She looked at Danilo. “Have you hired a private nurse for her?”

Danilo glowered. “Our situation is special. We don’t appreciate strangers in our home.”

“Then you’ll have to help her. Right now, she can’t do it herself yet.”

Danilo walked toward me, but I shook my head. “No!” I didn’t want my brother to help me undress so I could pee. I didn’t want him to lift me on the toilet. I’d prefer to go back to having a catheter before I allowed him to help me.

Danilo regarded me, but I could tell he wasn’t sure what to do.

My despair rose at seeing him helpless. My big, strong brother.

I swallowed hard. “I’ll practice every day so I can do it myself.”

“You go home in just a week unless your family changes their mind. Your body still has a lot of healing to do, Emma.”

She moved toward Danilo, and his expression became hard. “Listen, I don’t know anything about your world. But I know that your sister will need help in the beginning. Her body’s been through a lot. Her scars need to heal, inside and out. If she does too much too soon, it could set her back. Either you hire someone who’ll help her or someone from your family needs to do it. There are ways to preserve modesty if that’s a concern.” She paused. “And your sister needs a therapist. She needs to get grief counseling to come to terms with what she’s lost.”

I swallowed hard. In our world, people didn’t talk about going to therapy. Getting help for mental problems made you look weak. But at the moment, I felt weak—body and mind.

Coming to terms with what I’d lost… could I? Because sometimes it felt as if I’d lost too much to bear.

“My family will handle it,” Danilo clipped.

I tried to move the wheelchair back and finally got it unstuck. My progress toward the bathroom was slow, and my arms and hands tired quickly. The parts of my body that I could feel ached despite the pain medication. Once inside the bathroom, I froze. I didn’t have the strength to hoist myself out of the wheelchair and onto the toilet seat. I couldn’t even undress the lower part of my body without help. I would have to lift my hips to remove the sweatpants and panties, and that simply wasn’t an option—yet.

Danilo came in. I fought the urge to send him away but lost my fight against the tears of frustration and shame. He stepped up to me and touched my shoulder. “What can I do?” His voice oozed utter control, but I could see the strain around his eyes.

“If you grab me under the arms and lift me, I can try to push my pants down.” The nurses had always done it, so I wasn’t entirely sure if I could do it myself. “Then you’ll have to put me down on the toilet.”

I closed my eyes, hating every moment of this.

“Will I hurt her?” Danilo asked the nurse.

“I’ll take a look, but it’s been five weeks since her surgeries, so everything should be fine as long as you move slowly and carefully.”

I opened my eyes to see Danilo looking at my face with utter concern. He grabbed me under the armpits and lifted me a few inches from the wheelchair. It hurt, mostly in my hips and shoulders, but I stifled a noise. I

reached down and tried to push my sweatpants down, but the waistband made it difficult. I couldn’t put enough strength behind the movement because of my awkward position and tired muscles. Eventually, the nurse had to help, and Danilo set me down on the toilet seat. They both left, but it took me several minutes before I could finally let loose.

I didn’t immediately call for Danilo when I was done. I felt angry at my body for failing me, angry with the man who caused the accident, and angry with the doctors who couldn’t help me. But overwhelmingly, I felt utterly heartbroken and sad. Nothing would ever be like I was used to. How could a therapist change any of it? Would they make me forget reality?

“Emma?” Danilo called.

“Come in.” My voice was small, and tears had started streaming down my cheeks. I didn’t look up as Danilo came in. His shoes appeared in my line of vision. He gripped me and hoisted me up. I managed to pull up the sweatpants so they covered me. Danilo put me down in my wheelchair. I moved toward the wash basin and managed to turn the water on while Danilo watched me. I cleaned my hands, then leaned back in the chair.

“Progress,” the nurse said with a smile. I didn’t return the smile.

Eventually, she left. Danilo pushed me back into the bedroom, then crouched before me again. “Emma, you are strong. Soon, you’ll be able to do this alone, but as long as you can’t, I don’t mind helping you, okay?” I looked into his eyes and gave a small nod.

Four weeks after I had woken up from my coma, I returned home against the recommendation of the doctors. They thought I should go to a rehabilitation clinic, but Danilo and Dad weren’t confident that they could guarantee my protection there. All my therapy sessions would either take place at home or Danilo would drive me there.

When I finally came home, some feeling had returned to my legs. In the beginning, it was mainly as a tingling like the sensation of feeling returning

to your limbs after falling asleep, only that my legs didn't "wake" up, and the tingling felt more like a bothersome prickling. Despite the sleepless nights that this insistent prickling caused at first, it was better than the numbness of the first few days and weeks. Entirely numb areas remained like my toes, and my calves only signaled a sort of dull pressure when I put my weight on them or something very heavy rested on them. Apart from that, they didn't register touch.

My home didn't feel like a home anymore because I couldn't even get to my bedroom on the upper floor without someone carrying me there. I couldn't use the toilet without help because there weren't handles yet. The sinks were too high for me to reach while sitting in the wheelchair. The list was long. Apparently, Mom didn't want the house to be made accessible because that would equal accepting that I would have to use a wheelchair forever. Dad was already too poorly to bother getting involved in the argument. But a week after my return, Danilo lost it.

"As Underboss of this city, my word is law, Mother, for you and everyone else, and I've made the decision to turn this house into a place where Emma feels welcome. Tomorrow, craftsmen will arrive and start their work."

Mom was stunned into silence, and I felt relieved. The past few days had been a string of things I couldn't do because I couldn't reach them with my wheelchair. It had made me feel left out and helpless, even more so than in the hospital.

Once the elevator was installed and everything else was made accessible, I could move around the house without constant help. Everything still took a long time, and the shelves remained out of my reach, but I felt like I had regained a tiny bit of my freedom. Of course, Mom or Danilo was always home, but I felt a little more like my old self.

Every day, someone came over to do physical therapy and massages with me, and eventually, even a therapist visited me to help me cope. Despite Danilo's aversion to strangers in the house, the Outfit simply didn't have someone who specialized in helping someone with my type of spinal injury.

They were the only people I saw except for bodyguards, my family, and the doctors. Danilo wanted me out of the public eye until I felt stronger.

Sometimes I wondered if my mental state was the only reason I spent my days at home.

I didn't know how much of my condition was public knowledge. Many of my friends had written in the first few weeks after I woke up, but it soon became obvious that their curiosity was the reason and not true concern or friendship.

Eventually, when I didn't reveal more of my condition, most of them stopped writing. Only my closest friend Giorgia remained from my group of friends in Indianapolis. She, however, treated me as if nothing had happened.

When she visited me the first time, two weeks after my release from the hospital (Danilo hadn't allowed her to see me sooner), she walked straight past my concerned brother and hugged me tightly as if nothing had changed. Her mane of curly red hair tickled my face. She pulled back and smiled at me, then looked at the electric wheelchair in one corner of the foyer. I almost never used it. "Can I try it? I want to know how it is for you." She grimaced, then tilted her head, her blue eyes flickering with worry. "Was that rude? My mother said I should be careful not to be rude, but we've been friends forever. I mean, you know how I am."

I burst out laughing for the first time since my accident. "You are you, Giorgia, and I don't want you to act any different."

Giorgia sat on the electric wheelchair with her tongue wedged between her lips as she tried to figure out how it worked. I preferred the agility of my manual wheelchair. Danilo stood a few steps from us. He hovered a lot during the day, which meant he had to work at night. I wasn't sure when he ever slept. Giorgia let out a little screech when the wheelchair suddenly surged forward, and she almost collided with my brother. He cocked an eyebrow at her.

I laughed again. The sound felt foreign, and my ribs actually ached.

"Whoa, this thing is fast." She turned the joystick, and the chair moved to the right, almost striking the staircase. She sent me a wide-eyed look. "Is this made for racing?"

I bit my lip and shook my head. "It takes practice, but I prefer this chair." I patted my light, agile chair. She moved the wheelchair back to the corner, then she stood.

I felt a pang and had to swallow hard.

Giorgia’s expression fell, her eyes softening. I guess my face showed how much the sight of her simply getting out of the wheelchair hurt me because it would never be like that for me. My physical therapist had promised me we would work with leg braces as soon as my body allowed it, but he had also been very clear that with the damage my spinal cord had sustained, the chances of me walking without support ever again were almost nil.

“I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. She had nothing to be sorry for. “You made me laugh for the first time in weeks.”

Giorgia came over to me. “I thought we could watch a movie and eat popcorn?”

I nodded, so we moved upstairs to my room in the new elevator. Danilo finally left us alone.

We usually watched movies on my bed. Giorgia plopped down as usual, then sat up with an uncertain expression. “Or do you prefer to sit on the sofa?” She motioned to the sofa off to the side. I hadn’t used it since my accident. The TV could be turned either way.

“No,” I said, then wheeled closer to the bed. I arrested the brakes. I still had trouble getting from the wheelchair into bed, even if it was a new, lower model. Giorgia watched me as I tried to hoist myself into bed. After three tries, I finally managed to land my butt in bed. I used my arms to scoot backward until my back hit the headboard. Then I leaned back and had to take a deep breath. My body ached, and I felt tired from this brief movement.

Giorgia held the remote in her hand but hadn’t turned on the TV yet. “If you ever want to talk, I’m here.”

I nodded. I preferred talking to my therapist. It was easier to share my darkest fears with a near stranger than with the people I knew. “I want to watch a movie.”

Five minutes later, our maid appeared with a big bowl of popcorn and glasses of Coke.

As Giorgia and I watched the movie, shoulder against shoulder, I felt like the old Emma for the first time since waking from the coma.

One day, a few months after the accident, when it became clear that I'd never dance again, Mom threw away all my ballet clothes.

I only knew because she hadn't properly closed the drawer where I kept my leotards, and when I checked, I found it empty. I opened the other drawers with my ballet clothes, but they too were bare. Everything had disappeared without a word, without an explanation.

But I knew it was Mom. She'd sometimes mentioned how much I had to miss ballet and that I'd certainly be able to do it again soon. She'd probably been more devastated about the end of my ballet career than me. Still, I felt sorrow as I stared at the empty drawer. It symbolized another part of my old life I'd lost, another door that ultimately closed for me.

I'd enjoyed ballet, the grace and discipline, the costumes, the music, but it hadn't been my dream—until it had been taken from me. I would have loved to decide when I'd stop on my own terms… but I didn't have that choice. I'd have to come to terms with it as I had to do with many other changes in my life. In the beginning, life had felt like a chain of things I couldn't do anymore, but slowly, I discovered new things that gave me moments of happiness. Doing things with Giorgia and doing crafts like drawing, pottery, and origami.

What I missed more than dancing was the freedom the ability to walk gave you. I'd never realized how many stairs my daily routine included and how high up many of the things were that I needed on a daily basis. The first time I'd entered the kitchen to grab a glass of water after I'd returned home, I had been unable to reach the cupboard and had been left staring at it until our cook came in and helped me.

After that, she put glasses into a low cupboard so I could get them. It wasn't the last time I couldn't reach something. My family and I had to adapt to my new abilities. Step by step, our home turned into a place where I could do many things independently, but I knew that if I ever attended social gatherings again, things would be a new challenge.

About two and a half months after my accident, I got the first taste of what life with a disability meant in our antiquated, traditional world, and this event almost let other people's inability to cope with my disability become the way I also handled it.

I had been engaged to the eldest son of the Cincinatti Underboss since I was only four years old. Federico and I had only met a couple of times, and I had never given our bond more than a fleeting thought. Marriage was still a distant concept because I didn't care much about boys yet. When Federico's father came to visit without his son, I immediately had a bad feeling.

Danilo had told me to stay upstairs, but I had been utterly sheltered since my accident, and I finally wanted to get a glimpse of the outside world, even if it was only through brief small talk with Federico's father. Danilo's eyes strayed to me as I emerged from the elevator when Federico's father entered. The concern in Danilo's eyes triggered my own anxiety. How would the man react to my disability? He barely glanced my way when he came in, his eyes passing me by without a single greeting. "I need to talk to you and your father alone, Danilo. Without your sister."

My grip on the wheels tightened, probably thickening the newly formed calluses on my palms. I made myself smaller under his continued disregard of me.

Danilo's lips thinned, and the hard look in his eyes indicated how fragile his controlled mask was. "Go ahead. My father is at his desk. You know the way. I'll join you in a moment."

Mom strolled out of the living room. Federico's father gave her a quick nod before he stalked down the corridor toward Dad's office.

"What's going on?" Mom asked, pursing her lips. She'd worn a nice dress and put her brown hair in a sleek bun at the top of her head. "I prepared afternoon tea for all of us."

“You should wait with Emma in the living room. I have a feeling that things won’t be pleasant, and there won’t be an afternoon tea.”

I frowned at Danilo, but he only smiled tightly at me. Mom, however, had paled considerably at his statement.

Mom and I moved into the living room and sat at the coffee table, which our maid had filled with cakes and cookies for our guest and us.

I bit my lower lip, then glanced down at my calloused palm, tracing it with my fingers. I’d never had calluses on my hands, only on my toes from going on pointe. The latter had faded, and new ones had formed. Since my accident, it often felt like my heart would need calluses too to protect itself from what was to come.

“What do you think he wants?”

Mom’s eyes rested on my palms. “We need to make sure your hands don’t look like this. It’s not pretty. Maybe you need to use your electric wheelchair.”

I turned my hands over and cupped my thighs. “It’s too big, and I don’t like the sound it makes.”

Raised voices silenced me. I tried to understand what was being said, but Dad, Danilo, and Federico’s father seemed to all be screaming at the same time.

One of our bodyguards entered with a curt nod and positioned himself beside the door. He had taken over after my old bodyguard had been removed. He’d caused the accident because he was drunk on the job. I didn’t like thinking about him. Sometimes I hated him for what he’d done to me, and sometimes I felt almost guilty because he was dead now and not from the accident. My brother had killed him as punishment.

The shouting increased. Federico’s father appeared in the foyer, but he never came into the living room. Instead, he hurried toward the front door with a bright red face, looking like he couldn’t wait to get away.

“Don’t ever contact me for help again!” Dad roared, then started coughing horribly. The front door fell shut, and for a few heartbeats, nobody said anything. Only Dad’s desperate coughing and wheezing could be heard. Danilo appeared in the doorway, his face red, his hair tousled, and he had a thunderous look in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Mom asked fearfully.

“They canceled the engagement!” Dad sputtered as he appeared next to Danilo in the doorway, his face turning increasingly red as well.

Mom rose from the sofa, her hand covering her heart as if the words had broken it. “They can’t!”

“They can,” Danilo said quietly, his eyes on me, not our mother. “These are extraordinary circumstances, so no one will blame them, even if it’s absolutely dishonorable.”

Mom covered her face and began to cry bitterly. Dad came in and wrapped an arm around her to console her while I made myself smaller in my wheelchair, wishing I could disappear like some people seemed to prefer.

The engagement was canceled.

Another part of my old life was gone. What would happen now? Girls in our world needed to marry if they wanted to be accepted. I wanted to be part of our world and have a future in it like every other girl did, but would they allow me that?

Danilo came in and touched my shoulder. “This isn’t your fault,” he murmured. I tilted my head, wondering why that was the first thing out of his mouth.

He grimaced, looking exhausted. “You know what I mean.”

I swallowed and nodded even though I wasn’t sure. I was confused and scared and sad. I was too many things at once. “I do.”

I understood the meaning behind Danilo’s words, but maybe not in the way he wanted me to. I understood that people in our backward world thought something was wrong with me now. They valued certain beauty standards that I would never be able to fulfill.

“We’ll figure something out,” Danilo promised, squeezing my hand. Mom sobbed in the background as Dad tried consoling her.

My brother held power. I saw it in the way people looked at him. He’d certainly be able to make people act a certain way around me, but he wouldn’t be able to change their thoughts.

Mom hadn’t calmed down for a week, and Dad’s rage lingered even longer. Danilo was too controlled to show me what he felt. And me?

I had almost let the cancellation shove me back into the dark hole I’d been stuck in for the first few weeks after the accident. Even my therapist couldn’t pull me out. I’d felt worthless, out of place, and lost. I’d thought the wheelchair really meant the end of all my hopes. I’d thought I would be shackled to it and saw it as a burden when, in reality, it gave me freedom.

I had focused all my energy on physical training again, up to the point of utter exhaustion. I had to increase my painkillers to be able to work as hard as I needed to. I wanted to force my body to comply with my demands.

After several months of intensive training, my legs could hold me up for a few seconds if I held on to something. Countless hours of rehabilitation had given me a tiny piece of my old freedom back, but over time, I also realized that no matter what I did or how hard I trained, I wouldn’t walk without support like I used to. I would never comply with the beauty standards of our world again. The effects of the accident would always be visible in my gait, and I’d likely have to always use a wheelchair. I’d reached the end of what rehabilitation could do. My spinal cord wouldn’t miraculously heal itself. Some damage would always remain. It was the harsh truth Mom had wanted to hide from me, the harsh reality that was no longer a dark prediction, yet my daily life was harder to stomach for everyone around me than for myself. Acceptance didn’t come easily. It was more painful than the physical therapy, but its effects were far more rewarding.

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CHAPTER TWO

Samuel

Twenty years old

I'd known Danilo's face meant trouble the second I saw it. He couldn't accept that my twin Serafina didn't want to marry him. He still wanted her or someone he regarded as equally worthy. I didn't like the bartering that was soon going to happen. Marriage wasn't a romantic bond in our world. It was a business commodity.

Danilo gave me a brief nod as he entered the house. We were about the same age, but we'd never spent much time around each other, not just because he lived in another city.

Dad, our Capo Dante, and Danilo gathered in the office of our home. Everyone looked tired and annoyed. The past few months had been tough on all of us. Too many things hadn't gone to plan. My chest tightened when I thought of my own failures—one had led to my sister being kidnapped and the other had cost three friends their lives. Losses were constant shadows in a Made Man's life, but this past year had been more than I'd bargained for.

Danilo released a long-suffering sigh as if his whole fucking world had been shattered. He hadn't even known my sister well. For him, she'd been a trophy. For all I cared, he could just find another trophy wife and stop his bitching.

"My father insists I'll marry someone from your family. A bond between our families is necessary, especially at this time."

Dad sighed, looking tired and defeated. I wished he'd put more of his burden on my shoulders, but I also knew why he didn't. I had to prove myself again, and I would.

"Serafina won't marry. She needs time to heal," I growled. If he thought we'd force her to marry him after what she went through, he was delusional. I'd kick his posh ass if he didn't stop insisting.

Dante slanted a warning look at me, obviously sensing my agitation. I swallowed my fury to let him handle this. Maybe he had a better suggestion. Why not give his daughter Anna to Danilo?

"There are other options," he drawled.

Danilo looked ready to explode. "What options? I won't accept the daughter of any other Underboss. My city is important. I won't settle for less than was promised!"

Dante scowled, blue eyes flashing with anger. "Watch your tone, Danilo. I realize this situation is difficult, but I expect respect nonetheless."

My pulse raced with pure fury, and it wasn't easy to hold back. Too much anger had gathered in me in the past few months. "You can't have Fina!"

"You can't have Anna either," Dante said.

"You need my support in this war. You need a strong family at your back."

"Is that a threat?"

"That's a fact, Dante. You're a good Capo, but I insist I get what my family deserves. I won't settle for less."

"I won't force Fina into a marriage, not after what she went through," Dad said.

Dante nodded. "I agree."

"We're at an impasse, then."

Finally, Danilo got one thing right.

Dante gave Dad a look I didn’t like one bit. We were family, which was apparent by the blond hair we shared, but this wasn’t a favor between relatives, this was a Capo’s demand.

“Is that what you ask of me, Dante?”

“Pietro, if we follow the rules, Danilo could demand to marry Serafina. They were engaged.”

“I will give you Sofia,” Dad said after a moment.

I balled my hands to fists, unable to believe what was happening. Maybe I should have seen it coming.

“She’s what, eleven?” Danilo asked in distaste.

“Twelve in April,” I muttered. What were we doing here?

“I’m ten years older than her. I was promised a wife now.”

“You’ll be busy with this war and establishing your reign over Indianapolis. A later wedding should be of advantage for you,” Dante said.

“Danilo?” Dante asked when he didn’t react.

“I have one condition.”

I straightened. I could tell that whatever Danilo asked of us would be too much, but at this point, we didn’t have many options other than going into an open conflict with his family, which Dad didn’t want.

“What condition?” Dante asked.

Danilo looked at me, and I almost laughed. What did he want now?

“He marries my sister, Emma,” Danilo said.

Surprise washed over me, though I should have expected it. “She’s in a __”

“In a wheelchair, yes. Which is why nobody of worth wants her. My sister deserves only the best, and you are the heir to Minneapolis. If you all want this bond, Samuel is going to marry my sister, and then I’ll marry Sofia.”

Emma was around my sister’s age. I only knew who she was because of her wheelchair and the dishonorable story with Cincinatti. Many people in our world didn’t consider her good marriage material. It was a disgusting fact, but our world was cruel, especially to women, who were mostly regarded as a commodity to make deals. And now Emma and my sister would be the ware in one of the more fucked-up arrangements. “Fuck. What kind of twisted deal is that?”

“Why? Your father has been testing the waters for possible brides, and my sister is a Mancini. She’s a good match.”

If it took this to give my family peace, then I’d do it. A marriage wasn’t about love. It was a duty. I tried to recall her face or any interactions I might have had with her, but our age difference was simply too great. “I’ll marry your sister.”

I felt a moment of anger that Danilo had forced my hand, and I didn’t have a say in choosing my future bride. Dad looked relieved. He and Mom didn’t need more troubles, and the Mancinis could definitely cause us a lot of trouble.

Marriages were almost always arranged in our world, so I’d never expected to fall in love. My bond with Emma was no different, yet the way the agreement had come to be left a bitter taste in my mouth. If the girls found out how we’d weighed them against each other, they’d probably hate us. And for good reason.

Nine months later

I followed the same path as I did whenever I found spare time. Today, on the first anniversary of their deaths, the weight resting on my shoulders felt heavier than on the previous days. The family crypts of my friends were all in the same cemetery and only a few steps from each other. I always began with Arlo, then moved on to Enea before I finally reached Domenico’s last resting place: a small house made from white marble and closed by cast-iron gates that harbored generations of Domenico’s family. He was by far the youngest to have found his rest here, and considering his death, I doubted it was peaceful.

The gate creaked when I opened it and stepped into the dark inside of the crypt. Dankness and dust crawled into my nose. Several grave lights cast their eerie reddish light on the slots in the walls where the bones of Domenico’s ancestors rested, and he too would eventually find his last rest in one of them. Now, his mortal remains still lay in a massive coffin positioned in the very center of the vault, with the saint Mother of Christ casting her benevolent eyes on him. He’d never been laid out. Everyone had said their last goodbye to the shiny oak instead of a waxen face.

Flowers covered almost every surface of the coffin. Some of them were fake, but the others looked fresh, as if they'd been put there only this morning. My family had sent a generous amount of cash to all three families, and Domenico's mother seemed to invest it in flowers. I knew she visited daily and had done so since the funeral a year ago. I'd seen her several times during my visits but had always avoided her. She didn't need the additional anguish of seeing the man who was responsible for her son's brutal murder.

Our first encounter after Domenico's death, when I'd confessed to her why he'd died and apologized, still haunted me. Her anguished cries, her knees giving in, how Domenico's uncle held her up.

I touched the coffin briefly. "I'm sorry, my friend."

I uttered the same words every time, but they felt as hollow as on the first day. Feeling sorry for something that couldn't be changed was wasted time, especially in our world where death was a constant companion. I'd been to countless funerals, and many more would follow. Domenico's mother had driven me away from his wake with curses and slaps. I had allowed her to hit me several times before I'd taken my leave, knowing the pain she'd inflicted wasn't nearly as potent as the pain she felt.

Steps crunched behind me, and I tensed, my hand going to my gun in the holster around my waist.

"I knew I'd find you here," Renato said.

I lowered my hand, relaxing as my best friend approached me. He crossed himself, then briefly touched the coffin.

"It still feels surreal," he murmured.

I smiled bitterly. Surreal wasn't the word I would have used. Renato and I had often spent the weekends with Arlo, Enea, and Domenico. Now, it was only the two of us.

"Today is one year, right?" Renato asked.

I nodded. He wasn't certain. I hadn't been able to think about anything else these past few days leading to the day when I had ripped three sons from their mothers.

Renato let out a sigh. "You need to stop feeling guilty."

"I am guilty."

Renato gave me a frustrated look, his dark-brown brows pinching together. "You didn't kill them."

My lip curled, but my stomach became hollow like it always did when I remembered Enea's death. "I stabbed Enea."

"Not on purpose, for God's sake, Samuel. They were Made Men. We all are. Death is always a possibility. Many die young. Do you think Dante cries himself to sleep every night over his soldiers who have died on the missions he sent them on?"

I glanced at a photo of Domenico leaning against the coffin's bottom. He had his arms around Renato and Arlo. Enea was beside Arlo, and I had been beside Renato in the photo, but I wasn't now. Someone had cut me out. I didn't blame them. "There's a difference, Renato. I wasn't their Capo. I was their friend, and they were doing me a favor. They trusted my plan, and I failed them."

Renato shook his head. "They knew of the plan before you went to Las Vegas. They thought it was a good plan. I would have followed you there too if I hadn't been in Chicago."

Three of my friends had followed me, no questions asked, to save my twin sister from the hands of our worst enemy.

Renato wasn't dead like the others because he'd been on another mission in Chicago with his father so he couldn't join me.

"Come on, let's have a drink. You need one."

One drink wouldn't be enough. I followed Renato out of the crypt and closed the gates. We went to our favorite bar and settled in one of their VIP rooms on the red satin armchairs with lion-clawed feet. I ordered a Negroni, my poison of choice, and took a big gulp. I let my head fall against the headrest and briefly closed my eyes.

Arlo's shocked face flashed before my eyes as he died by Remo Falcone's knife. He was gone in a blink, the kindest of all three deaths.

Then it was Enea's face that popped up. His expression was a mix of surprise and pain when my knife buried itself in his stomach. My face had probably mirrored the same emotions. My stab had been aimed at Remo, but he'd pulled Enea up by the collar and used him as his shield. Enea hadn't died right away. It took a few painful gasps and intakes of breaths before he passed away. I wished I could have held him in his last moments, but I'd fought for my life against the madman from Vegas.

And the last one…Domenico's face materialized before my closed eyelids like a grotesque wax figure from a horror cabinet. Even in death, his

face had been twisted with agony from hours of torture by the hand of the Falcones. Most of my nightmares revolved around him. I'd been witness to torture before and had been tortured myself, but rarely any of it replayed in my dreams. Yet seeing a friend being tortured to death because he wanted to help me?

Fuck, that haunted me every night and sometimes by day too. I doubted that would get better, even as the years passed. My foolish plan had robbed my friends of the chance to marry, grow old, and have a family.

And had it brought me Serafina back? I didn't save her that day, and later, when she'd finally returned to us, I'd realized that truly saving her from Falcone's grip was impossible.

"How's your sister?" Renato asked after a while.

I opened my eyes. "Always tired. The twins suck the life out of her."

Renato shook his head. "Still can't believe she kept them."

It was a topic we'd discussed plenty of times before. I nodded but didn't say anything. I didn't want to think of Remo Falcone's offspring, not on a day when I mourned the friends he'd killed. It was difficult because they looked exactly like him, and nothing like Fina, who had blond hair and blue eyes like me.

"I'm going to marry Danilo Mancini's sister," I said casually. The agreement had happened nine months ago, but I'd kept it to myself so far.

Renato sat up straight in his chair, his brows shooting up. "Wheelchair girl?"

I scowled. "Emma Mancini is her name, and I expect you to treat her with the necessary respect, considering she's my future wife."

"Sure, but how did this happen?" Renato opened his arms, palms pointing my way, demanding an explanation.

"It's a deal between Danilo and my family."

"Don't tell me that happened back when Sofia was promised to him?"

I took another sip from my drink before I nodded. Renato leaned forward and shoved my knee so hard that I almost spilled my Negroni.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me before?"

"Too much going on. It didn't seem important at the time."

Renato scoffed. "Not important? You're talking about the woman you have to spend the rest of your life with."

"It's still a while before I can marry her." I shrugged.

Renato mimicked my shrug with a pissed expression. He shook his head and sank back against the headrest. “Really?” He shook his head again. “Fuck. That’s hard.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Come on, you could have married anyone, and you get the girl who Cincinatti left at the altar.”

“They canceled the engagement, Renato. There’s a difference.”

“They canceled the engagement because she’s in a wheelchair, Samuel.”

“That was dishonorable and tasteless,” I muttered. “I can’t see why her being in a wheelchair gave them the right to cancel the engagement.”

“Yet most people got it and would probably have done the same if their only son had been promised to the girl.”

“I won’t leave her at the altar,” I said matter-of-factly. I didn’t know anything about Emma, except that Sofia liked her very much and that she was apparently very kind.

“Sometimes you’re too honorable for your own good.”

I emptied the rest of my drink. I wouldn’t have chosen Emma for various reasons. Her wheelchair was one of them. But not in the way Renato probably suspected. A wife in a wheelchair was another level of responsibility I didn’t want to have. Fuck, I’d gotten three good friends killed. Being responsible for anyone, especially someone as vulnerable as Emma, wasn’t something I was really keen on. And there was the matter of needing to create an heir at some point. As the eldest son and future Underboss, I was expected to produce offspring. If rumors could be believed, Emma wouldn’t be able to give me any. But that was a worry for the future, and I never made a habit out of trusting rumors anyway.

Renato nudged me again. “Don’t get lost in your shitty thoughts again. Let’s have a few more drinks and then go to a club to let off some steam.”

Getting shit-faced sounded like a good plan.

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CHAPTER THREE

14 years old

"You look marvelous!" Giorgia crooned.

I bit my lip, feeling really pretty in the dress I'd picked for her brother's wedding. It was one of the few social gatherings I'd attended since my accident. The last time had been Dad's funeral. The stares or obvious attempts not to stare at me had made me feel very anxious back then. Remembering that day caused a flood of anxiety inside me.

The past

"I wouldn't want to be in Danilo's shoes," someone whispered. "A grieving mother, left by his future wife, and responsible for taking care of a disabled sister."

My face heated. I wondered if people thought I was deaf. Since I was in a wheelchair, it happened often that they didn't lower their voices around me. They cast what they considered inconspicuous glances at me.

I bottled my anger up like I'd been taught to as a good girl. I wanted to scream and rage, and sometimes I wanted to hide and cry. Currently, I felt

like doing the latter.

I still couldn't believe that Dad was dead and we'd buried him this morning. Now people had gathered in our home to eat and drink and gossip. It was horrible, and I wished I could disappear.

A couple came my way, and I couldn't get away before they cornered me.

"Hello, my dear, we're so sorry that your dad's gone to heaven."

The words themselves might have been okay, but the woman spoke to me as if I were three. Another thing I detested. Some people thought I was mentally handicapped because I couldn't walk. "I doubt Made Men go to heaven," I said defiantly but instantly felt guilty. I hoped Dad had found a place in heaven, or at the very least his peace. But these people made me so angry.

Danilo appeared by my side and touched my shoulder. At once, the couple talked to him and ignored me, and I was glad for that.

When they finally disappeared, Danilo met my gaze. "Are you okay?"

"No," I whispered.

Danilo nodded. "Stay strong. In a few hours, they will be gone, then it's only us."

"If your stupid ex-fiancé could see you now… Maybe we should send him a photo."

My heart clenched, remembering the soul-crushing scene of his father coming to our house to cancel the engagement and how it had made me feel. How small and worthless. It had taken months to move on but not because of my ex-fiancé—losing him hadn't hurt. He had been a stranger after all. That day, I felt like I'd lost any chance at a happy future.

Eventually, I found a routine in my home that made me forget about the restrictions I often encountered outside or at other people's houses. Whenever my family was invited to a dinner, Mom fretted over accessibility weeks before the actual event. Of course, she'd never inquire with the hosts if I could access everything. She didn't want to bring attention to my disability as if someone could actually miss it. Sometimes I wondered if she was embarrassed of me. I didn't dare ask, and she never said it outright. I wished she would treat my disability and my wheelchair with more casualness. If she showed others that it wasn't inconvenient or

even embarrassing, perhaps people would treat me normally. Mom's inability to stand up for me made me equally angry and sad.

If Giorgia hadn't taken matters into her own hands, the hotel where her brother's wedding took place wouldn't even be aware of my disability.

I knew it was hard for Mom. Our society made it hard for her. It was a world ruled by old-fashioned, powerful men. Men who valued three things in women: beauty, child-bearing qualities, and innocence. In their eyes, I couldn't fulfill the first condition. I liked my face and body. Both were pleasing to look at but not flawless in how they were defined in our mafia world.

The moment I entered the wedding location that day, I was reminded of our world's bias.

It was strange how an accident, how me being in a wheelchair, changed the way people perceived me, even people who'd met me before.

Suddenly, most gazes passed me by as if looking at me directly made them uncomfortable. And those who still dared to look at me always averted their eyes with an air of embarrassment and almost guilt as soon as I made eye contact, as if I'd caught them doing something indecent. As if they felt guilty for being able to walk when I couldn't. It made me resent our world and wonder if I could ever really belong in it.

That they were looking wasn't indecent, but I could imagine that their thoughts made them feel guilty and unable to return my gaze.

I wasn't stupid, and despite what some people might think, I wasn't deaf either. I heard them whisper loudly about what a shame it was that a beautiful girl like me was in a wheelchair. They made it sound as if my being in a wheelchair stole my beauty from me. Even at fourteen years old, the enormity of their judgment already hit me hard.

In a world where women were solely judged by their beauty and their child-bearing qualities, I was regarded as less.

Less beautiful than a girl who could walk freely on her own legs. Less in so many more ways I didn't want to waste a moment thinking about.

Most days, I managed not to think about the many hurdles I'd have to face in our world. But on days like today, it was hard.

Over time, I'd forced myself to readjust my hopes and expectations. Would I ever walk freely again? No. Would I marry? Probably not. Today, as I watched the married couple do their first dance, sorrow and wistfulness

hit me full force, and I allowed myself to feel both for the duration of the dance.

I had erased hopes of my own wedding from my mind as much as it was possible.

The moment the dance floor opened for everyone, Giorgia was ushered toward her brother to dance with him. I watched her with a small smile, fighting the desire to move toward the dance floor and dance. Giorgia and I had full-fledged dance-offs at home, but I had never danced in my wheelchair in public.

“Would you prefer to leave?” Danilo murmured.

I quickly shook my head because I wanted to be part of our world. I wouldn’t hide.

Giorgia met my gaze across the room and motioned for me to come her way.

My eyes widened. By now, the music had switched to fast pop songs. When I didn’t follow her invitation, she hurried toward me with a grin and held out her hand. “Let’s dance.”

I let her pull me along toward a corner of the dance floor, then she released me and began to jump and twirl to the music. I could see people watch her with raised eyebrows over her display of careless joy. Giorgia was curvy, too curvy by our beauty standards, but it didn’t stop her from enjoying herself. Emboldened by her confidence, I moved my wheelchair to the music until everyone else faded into the background.

I’d carve out my own bubble of happiness.

16 years old

Danilo was tense. Tenser than usual, that was. Since Dad's death, he'd constantly been on edge. I still remembered a more easygoing Danilo, but that had been way before Dad's death, before his fiancée had been kidnapped and then later run off with her kidnapper.

We moved into an accessible executive suite in the best hotel in Minneapolis a day before my brother's engagement. The view over the Mississippi River and the city was spectacular. The hotel had two bigger suites, but they weren't accessible, so we chose this one, and it offered enough space for us. Danilo had to sleep on a sofa bed because the suite only had one bedroom. The carpet was very fluffy, which made moving along with my wheelchair a bit strenuous and gave my arms a good workout.

Danilo's face was hard, almost foreboding. Not the face of someone excited about his engagement. His *second* engagement, this time to Sofia, his ex-fiancée's little sister. She was only a month older than me. I really liked Sofia. She was kind, and she still talked to me like she did before my accident.

"Are you excited?" I asked him.

He looked up from his phone, where he'd no doubt been checking work emails. "Excited?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes with a teasing smile. "About your engagement."

Danilo shook his head. “I don’t see why I should be. This is my second engagement, and I’m only concerned about making it to the wedding this time.”

I hoped he didn’t share his thoughts with Sofia. She struck me as an emotional person who seemed quite happy about her bond to my brother. “I would be excited if this was the day before my engagement.”

Danilo put down his phone, reluctance passing across his face. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

I wheeled closer. “My sentiments toward an engagement that’s probably never going to happen?” The moment the bitter words left my mouth, I wanted to slap myself. I didn’t like it when I turned bitter. That Cincinatti had broken our families’ promise that we’d marry had stung, and my options were slim, but my happiness didn’t depend on marriage. At least, I tried to tell myself this as often as possible, especially now that I was at an age when most other girls were already promised. Sweet sixteen. I wasn’t sure who’d invented that term, but they’d probably never heard the jibing comments of older female relatives who made sixteen sound like the tipping point before you turned rotten and unmarriageable. I often felt left out. When girls my age talked about how guys checked them out, I always felt a pang. I’d had boys give me flirty looks before, but they hadn’t been part of our world where everyone just seemed to look at my wheelchair and not the person inside. It frustrated me, but I wasn’t sure how to change people’s perception.

“No,” Danilo said slowly. He stood and squatted before me like he often did when we had something unpleasant to discuss. I narrowed my eyes, wondering what was going on. “The Miones and I came to an understanding.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. Sofia was a Mione, but I didn’t understand his strange behavior if this was about his engagement to Sofia.

Danilo met my gaze and took my hands. Now I was really concerned. “Pietro, Samuel, and I agreed that you would marry Samuel.”

Samuel Mione.

Future Underboss.

Ice prince.

I had only talked to him once, and the memory washed over me like an icy flood.

Samuel and his father attended Dad's funeral like all Underbosses of the Outfit. Samuel stood out from the crowd with his blue eyes, blond hair, and tall frame. Many girls fancied him. Now he looked tired, with dark shadows under his eyes and a haunted expression on his face. Ever since his sister had run off to join the Camorra, he'd looked like that. It must have been hard for him.

He and his father shook hands with Danilo before they turned to me.

"My condolences," Samuel said, meeting my gaze. He was one of the very few who looked me in the eyes. Most people seemed uncomfortable to do so—either because of my grief or my wheelchair. In most cases, it was probably a combination of the two.

"Thank you," I said softly. I considered telling him I was sorry about his sister, but I wasn't sure if that was a good idea. Danilo always got grumpy when I mentioned her, and I had a feeling Samuel felt even worse, considering it was his twin.

Samuel nodded, then returned his gaze to Danilo. The tension between them was palpable. It had gotten much worse in the past year, but Danilo refused to discuss it.

I stared at my brother in the present. My heart began pounding, my ears closing off, my throat feeling tight. Samuel was a good catch, a great catch. Most people in our cruel mafia world would even go as far as to say he was too good a catch for me.

Sometimes I caught myself mimicking those horrible thoughts. Not because I believed that I was worth less because of my wheelchair but because the people in our world thought so.

Women were judged by their, if possible, flawless beauty. To think of a disabled woman as beautiful was unheard of. People's sight reduced itself to the device supporting me, not the body it held. It wasn't my job to make them see reason.

Even as a child, I'd heard and understood the whispers when Cincinatti had broken off things. People had pitied me because I was disabled and doomed to be alone, but nobody had really blamed Cincinatti's Underboss for wanting the best for his son, which apparently wasn't me, and protecting him from a childless future at my side.

And now the Miones, now Samuel had chosen me as his wife?

“Why—” I cleared my throat. “Why did he choose me?”

Danilo frowned. “Aren’t you happy?”

Was I happy? I didn’t think so. First of all, I was overwhelmed and suspicious of the arrangement. “Why?”

Danilo pulled his hands away, then got up and perched on the sofa next to me. “Because our families are both important and—”

“Please don’t say it’s to strengthen our bond.”

His mouth twitched in a ghost smile that was gone before it could really manifest. “It’s one reason, of course. It’s always been done this way. You know that.”

“I also know that our families are already bonded because of your engagement to Sofia, and I know I’m not the most sought-after bachelorette on the market. It doesn’t make sense for Samuel to choose me unless he hopes to get bonus points for marrying a cripple.”

“Emma,” Danilo growled, “don’t use that word.”

“I can call myself whatever I want,” I said firmly. I hated the word with every fiber of my being, but it got my point across.

“Samuel wants a good, caring wife, and that’s what you’ll be. He doesn’t care if you’re in a wheelchair.”

I wanted to believe that, but doing so would have been foolish, and I didn’t like being a fool.

“Just be happy, alright? This is good for you. You have a bright future ahead of you with an important husband and a family of your own.”

Most of all, Danilo wouldn’t have to worry about me as much as he would had I stayed a spinster. Maybe he would even have felt obligated to let me live under the same roof with him and Sofia. It was better this way—definitely for Danilo and for me too. Annoyed, I wheeled back until I could turn around. “I need some water.”

“I can get—”

“I’ll get it myself,” I said, moving toward the small kitchen area of the suite. I opened the minibar and took out one of the tiny San Pellegrino bottles. I could practically feel Danilo’s questioning gaze burning into my back as I emptied the bottle in a few gulps, not even bothering with a glass. My annoyance had barely lessened, but I knew I had to continue this conversation. With a sigh, I put the bottle on the counter, then returned to my brother, who honestly looked confused by my reaction.

Had he thought I'd be overjoyed?

Maybe I should be happier? I promised myself not to doubt Samuel's decision. "Does Mom know?"

"Of course. She's delighted. We both are, Emma."

Of course, she was. She'd been deeply worried that I'd end up alone. Spinsters were looked down upon in our world.

"When will it be announced?" I asked. The news would spread like wildfire, and people would spread rumors just as quickly. This was a bond nobody had expected, and thus, it would be dissected until it was a tattered, dirty thing.

"Tomorrow after my official engagement to Sofia."

My eyes grew wide in alarm. "You're going to announce it at your engagement party? What does Sofia say to that? It's her day, after all."

"I didn't ask her. It seems like the best time. After all, we're here, and it doesn't make sense to travel all the way to Minneapolis just for an announcement. Samuel and I are both busy."

"Danilo," I said in exasperation. I couldn't believe he hadn't asked Sofia. "I don't want to hurt Sofia's feelings."

His puzzled expression made it clear that the thought hadn't even crossed his mind. "It's just an announcement. And it's not like it's our wedding day. Don't overthink this. Just be happy. In two years, you'll be Samuel's wife."

I forced a smile. "Thank you." I could tell Danilo was disappointed by my lackluster reaction, but I couldn't think straight. "I'm going to bed so I'm well rested for my big day tomorrow."

Danilo pressed a kiss to my cheek like he always did, and I wheeled into my bedroom. After a deep breath, I moved into the bathroom to change into my nightgown. I arrested the brakes of my wheelchair, then pushed myself up and scooted down to the edge of the seat. Twisting to the right, I used my left hand to shove down my skirt, then did the same with the other side until the fabric pooled at my feet. I lifted one foot after the other, then bent down, picked up my skirt, and put it over the vanity chair. I removed my pullover, then pulled my nightgown over my head. Grabbing the handles, I pushed myself up, supporting myself with my legs until the nightgown slid down over my bum before I dropped back into the seat of my wheelchair. When I was done with my evening routine, I returned to the bedroom.

The mattress was softer than what I was used to at home, so my hand sank in when I tried to slide from my wheelchair into the bed, almost causing me to slip down. I caught myself and released a sigh. Traveling days were always hard on my body and mind. For one, they gave me anxiety. I always felt physically drained in the evening of such a day, meaning my legs were less capable of supporting my weight.

Once I lay in the dark, I couldn't fall asleep for hours. My thoughts kept revolving around Samuel. I couldn't deny it. He would have been my top choice if I could have chosen a husband from the available bachelors. I didn't mind that he was eight years older. I actually preferred it. Maybe it was because of my accident, but I was more mature than boys and even girls my age.

Not to mention that I found Samuel attractive. Really, who didn't? Many girls in our world talked about his looks. There weren't many blonds around, and his blue eyes always sent a pleasant shiver down my back. And he was tall and fit…

I bit my lip.

Our interactions after the funeral were pretty much nonexistent except for a few shared pleasantries here and there. I didn't know him, not that I had expected to know my husband. That just wasn't likely in our circles. I only knew things about him, mainly from Danilo or the occasional snippet of gossip. Samuel had been a favorite topic ever since his twin sister's kidnapping and his failed attempt to save her. His entire family had been dragged down the gossip hole.

Maybe that was why the Miones had agreed to the marriage. Perhaps they thought it would turn the rumors more favorable or finally drag the attention away from their daughter who now lived with the enemy Capo in Las Vegas.

Even if that option wasn't really an ego booster, it was better than the alternative: that Danilo blackmailed Samuel in some way. I loved my brother, but he could be ruthless.

I sighed and closed my eyes. It didn't stop my thoughts from whirring, but eventually, I fell asleep.

I’d chosen the more festive of the two dresses that I’d brought. A berry-colored floor-length cocktail dress that accentuated my waist and covered my legs. I was still shy about them even though they apparently weren’t different, albeit less muscled than someone who used them for walking. A small origami four-leaf clover I’d folded this morning sat beside me in my wheelchair, hidden under my skirt. I hoped it would bring me luck today. I wasn’t very superstitious in daily life, but I liked to use additional luck bringers for special occasions. I’d also hidden another four-leaf clover in the inside pocket of Danilo’s jacket. Knowing him, he’d need all the luck to make his marriage to Sofia work.

The home of the Miones wasn’t accessible, but they’d installed a temporary ramp so I could reach the front door. The open doorways, spacious rooms, and smooth marble flooring allowed me to move easily through the mansion. When I entered the living room by Danilo’s side, my eyes immediately sought Samuel, hoping for something that would ease my worries, but he didn’t look my way. He was in conversation with his father and seemed oblivious to my presence. I was impossibly nervous—not just about talking to Samuel but also about everyone’s reaction to the announcement.

As usual, he looked incredibly good in a dark blue suit that brought out the blue of his eyes even more. I tried to imagine seeing those eyes gazing upon me with love, but the image always distorted before it could fully form.

When it was time for our announcement, my stomach was knotted. Danilo gave me a brief smile before he and Mr. Mione addressed the guests.

Mr. Mione cleared his throat, then clanged his knife against his wineglass. “We have another announcement to make. Danilo, would you?”

I could see the confusion on Sofia’s face and cringed inwardly. I really wished Danilo had talked to her before, but I didn’t feel like it was my place to do so.

“It is with great honor that I’d like to announce that our families, the Miones and the Mancinis, will further our bond. Samuel will marry Emma the same summer as my wedding to Sofia takes place,” Danilo said in a festive tone.

I held my breath, feeling my cheeks heat under the sudden attention.

Samuel stepped up to my side, gave me a quick smile that was tense and definitely not joyful, then lightly touched my shoulder. A pleasant shiver passed through my body at the contact. Samuel smelled wonderful, and his fingers felt warm and strong.

The reactions of the people in the room ranged from open shock to utter disbelief or even blatant incomprehension. Only Mom looked absolutely delighted.

Soon, the first people came over to congratulate us. While Dante and Valentina and even Anna and Sofia seemed honest, soon other guests appeared before us that had trouble hiding their true emotions. I could see their astonishment over the announcement. Some looked almost displeased as if this bond went against their belief system. I forced my face to remain pleasant and accept their congratulations as if they weren’t fake. I didn’t dare look up at Samuel, embarrassed by people’s demeanor that he certainly must have picked up on too.

I even picked up the occasional tidbit of whispered conversation.

“It’s a shame.”

“He’s such an attractive man. What a pity.”

“Maybe they’ll pay a surrogate, or he’ll get a mistress pregnant.”

The last one made my eyes burn with unshed tears. I risked a glance up at Samuel. His hand still rested lightly on my shoulder, but he hadn’t said anything. He narrowed his eyes at a couple who didn’t hide their disapproval of the announcement, causing them to lower their faces at his silent reprimand. It made me feel a bit better.

He leveled his gaze on me. His expression was emotionless and completely controlled. “Are you all right?” he asked quietly.

“Of course,” I said quickly. I didn’t want him to think I was soft and breakable, even if I often felt that way at moments like this.

He gave a terse nod, his eyes slanting to the next couple of congratulators.

The Miones approached us when the attention shifted back to Sofia and Danilo. They smiled at me, but while Ines looked genuinely happy, Pietro seemed more restrained. “Congratulations,” Ines said and bent down to kiss my cheek and hug me lightly. She was a woman who still turned many heads with her shiny blond hair and elegant appearance.

“Thank you, Mrs. Mione,” I said softly.

“Please call me Ines. We’ll be family in two years.”

I flushed and nodded. Pietro shook my hand. I hadn’t really expected a hug from him. I knew him as a restrained man. “Call me Pietro.”

“Thank you,” I said again. I wasn’t sure what else to say. I still hadn’t processed what had happened. Ines gave Samuel a warm smile, but I also caught a hint of worry in her eyes. Was it because of me?

“I hear that you participate in an organization that raises money to help other people with disabilities?” Ines asked.

I was surprised she knew. I never talked about it, mainly because people didn’t show any interest in my life after my accident. I nodded. “Yes. We also created a support group for Made Men with disabilities.”

Pietro and Samuel exchanged a look that made it clear they thought it unnecessary. Many men were too proud to consider seeking help for any problem. But quite a few Made Men lost limbs, their vision, or the ability to walk or hear. It was a dangerous life, after all, and many considered themselves less of a man when they were disabled in some way. Suicide wasn’t uncommon among men after such a tragedy. Some still favored death over what they considered living an unworthy life. As a young woman, it was difficult to make an impact on these men, but we had a pastor who led the meetings.

Ines and I chatted a bit more about my charity work before she and Pietro went over to Dante and his wife again, leaving me alone with Samuel once more.

I gave him a hesitant smile, wishing I could talk to him as easily as I’d chatted with his mom, but I was completely tongue-tied with him. My thoughts just kept revolving around how the engagement came to be. Maybe he’d tell me one day. Though I wasn’t sure my heart could take it.

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CHAPTER FOUR

After several moments of awkward silence between Samuel and me, he asked in a polite voice, “Do you need anything?” His twin sister had always been called the ice princess, but he was certainly an ice prince, as gorgeous and cold as one.

His question was probably innocent, but I couldn’t help but think that he wouldn’t have worded it that way if I weren’t disabled. Maybe he would have asked if I wanted a drink or if he could bring me anything, but asking if I *needed* anything made it sound like I couldn’t get it myself. “No, I’m fine.”

Another couple came our way. I quickly plastered a smile on my face.

When the attention and fake congratulations got too much, I headed for the restroom. Luckily, there was one on the ground floor, as there wasn’t an elevator in the house. I could only hope that it would offer enough space for my wheelchair. I opened the door. It was a spacious bathroom, but even so, my wheelchair wouldn’t fit inside.

To my relief, the distance between the door and the toilet wasn’t too long, and there was the sink and the doorknob I could hold on to, so I

should be fine. I briefly considered asking Danilo to help me with the wheelchair, but he'd been in conversation with Dante and Mr. Mione, and I didn't want to ask for help in front of so many people.

"Do you need help?" Samuel asked, making me gasp. I hadn't heard him approach, but he stood a few steps behind me in the lobby, regarding me with a frown.

Samuel was the last person I wanted help from. I didn't want him to think he had to become my caregiver—which he probably already did—because that wasn't the case. I could do things on my own, even if it sometimes took a bit longer than it would for others. All that stopped me from being completely independent was inaccessible local conditions.

I quickly shook my head, my cheeks flushing. Samuel's brows pulled together, and I wanted nothing more than to bolt. Part of me wanted to scream in frustration. Mrs. Mione appeared behind her son, and now I really wished the ground would swallow me. I hoped no more people would join them.

"Let me have a word with Emma, okay?" she said to Samuel, who nodded and returned to the living room, probably relieved he wouldn't have to deal with me. People often acted awkward around disabled individuals. I remembered how Danilo had initially treated me for lack of knowing any better and out of a feeling of helplessness. But now? He knew exactly when I needed help and what to do to make things easier for me.

Mrs. Mione smiled kindly. She was a breathtakingly gorgeous woman with a natural elegance that few possessed. "I'm sorry we don't have a more accessible bathroom."

I shrugged with a small smile. "Few people do. Don't worry." I knew that not every place I'd visit in the future would be accessible. It was something I took into consideration. When we visited other houses, I often didn't drink anything before or during the trip to avoid having to use the bathroom, but I'd been too nervous today.

Mrs. Mione approached me, peering into the bathroom thoughtfully. "Do you want me to push you in, and then I could help you…"

"I can go in myself, but it would be great if you could remove the wheelchair so I can close the door. I'll call you once I'm done and need it again."

“Of course,” she said, but I could hear the hint of hesitation in her voice. People were always worried about doing something wrong.

I wheeled into the bathroom, then gripped the washstand, which was a solid marble surface on a wooden table. It could easily hold my weight. When I pulled myself out of the wheelchair to stand, I noticed Mrs. Mione’s surprise. Many people thought that my using a wheelchair meant I couldn’t use my legs at all. I rarely bothered to explain the details of my condition to them. Most people preferred to remain in their prejudiced bubble anyway.

Mrs. Mione waited until I stood safely before she removed the wheelchair and closed the door.

After I was done and had washed my hands, I called her again. She carefully opened the door and peeked in as if she worried that I might not be decent. I gave her a smile and returned to my wheelchair, wishing my mind would come up with something to say to stop the embarrassing silence.

Mrs. Mione backed away to give me room to exit the bathroom.

“Thank you for your help, Mrs. Mione.”

She shook her head and gently touched my shoulder. “I told you to call me Ines. Hearing that name makes me think of my mother-in-law. And I’m glad I could help you.”

I didn’t like to ask for help, but in instances like this, I was glad I hadn’t refused her.

Her eyes moved to something on the ground, and she bent down, picking up the small origami clover I must have dropped. She regarded it curiously, then peered up at me. “Is this yours?”

“Yes. I crafted it this morning for a little extra luck.”

“Wow. You did this? It’s gorgeous.”

I smiled. “Thank you. This is an easier piece. I started the hobby shortly after my father’s death. I needed something to keep busy, and pottery turned out to be too much of a mess for our housekeeper.”

“You’ll have to show me one day.”

“Of course, Mrs. Mione.”

Ines raised her eyebrows.

“Ines,” I said with a hint of embarrassment for calling her by her last name again. It was strange to think she’d be part of my family in two years. It still hadn’t sunk in that I was going to marry Samuel.

Today’s celebrations were the reason I rarely enjoyed attending social events anymore. The backstabbing, fake-smiling, lies-spewing way of many people in our world brought out the rage I tried to keep in check. Which was of course hypocritical of me, considering I gave them the same fake smile while I killed a considerate number of them in my head, especially after how disgusting some of them had reacted to the announcement of my engagement.

I went out into our backyard after I’d left Emma with my mother in front of the guest bathroom. The moment I was outside, I took a deep breath. I’d kept up my pleasant mask inside, especially with all the other Underbosses in attendance. Well, not all of them. Cincinatti hadn’t been invited. Danilo had insisted they stay away after what they did to Emma. I didn’t really care about their attendance.

A hand touched my shoulder, and I tensed briefly before Dad came into view. He lit a cigarette and took a deep drag before he stared up at the darkening sky and blew out the smoke.

“Don’t let Mom see you.”

“She’ll smell it on me. She always does,” he said with a small smile. “Once life’s less stressful, I’ll give it up.”

“When’s that ever going to be the case?”

“One day,” Dad said, then chuckled as if he’d made a good joke. “Did you want to be alone?”

I shrugged. I had wanted to be alone, but Dad knew when to be silent. His presence hardly ever bothered me. “I don’t mind.”

Dad regarded me from the side. “A wife has to make you feel at home. Everything else is fleeting, but that feeling of coming home whenever you see someone? That’s what matters.”

“I told you I’m okay with the marriage. Emma is a pretty girl, and I’m sure she and I will get along.” I gritted my teeth. “But I have a bad track record with people who depend on me, and she’s more dependent than others.”

“Nobody could have protected your sister, and your friends…they were Made Men. They could take care of themselves.”

I nodded. “I should go back. I don’t want to leave Emma alone.”

It was a surprising thought, but I definitely felt protective of her. I turned and went back inside. Emma was talking to Anna and Sofia, so I decided to go to Renato instead, who was talking to the future Underboss of Columbus, Cosmo. I nodded at them both.

Renato clapped my shoulder.

“This came as a surprise,” Cosmo said. I could see the curiosity in his eyes. If he thought I’d give him any details about why the arrangement came to be, he hadn’t paid much attention to my reputation.

“I prefer to keep my cards close to my chest.”

Renato smirked.

“A noble thing…” He kept droning on and on, but I mostly ignored him. The verdict over our engagement was pretty clear. People didn’t understand and even openly disapproved. I didn’t care. But even now, I could see how uncomfortable Emma felt.

“She doesn’t look like she hit the jackpot with you,” Renato murmured.

Everyone thought Emma should be ecstatic about this bond, a bond that saved her in many people’s eyes, but Renato was right. True delight definitely wasn’t visible on her face. But I couldn’t tell whether this was because of people’s tasteless whispers or because she didn’t want to marry me.

I was eight years older than her. Maybe that was an issue. I strode over to her. “Do you have a moment?”

“Of course,” Emma said, her cheeks turning red as she followed me. I led her out onto the patio of our backyard. People would still be able to see

us but not hear us.

Emma peered up at me with an uncertain smile. I sat on one of the chairs so we'd be at eye level. I didn't want to stare down at her the entire time.

Her smile became a bit broader, but she sobered considerably when I didn't smile in return. I glanced out over our vast backyard, wondering what I was doing. "Danilo told you yesterday?"

She peered down at her elegant fingers. She still needed a ring. This announcement had come sooner than expected, and my mind had been far from thoughts about weddings or engagements these past few years.

"He did last night."

"It must have come as a surprise."

She smiled strangely down at her hand as if trying to imagine herself with a ring but couldn't. "It did. A day isn't much time to prepare for an engagement you didn't expect. You had more time, I suppose."

She peered up then, and her brown eyes searched mine as if she were testing her statement's truth. I assumed Danilo hadn't revealed when we'd struck the deal since it would raise too many questions. Obviously, she was wary of how the engagement had come to be. She had every reason to be, but she would never find out the distasteful truth from me. For one, it would crush not just her but also Sofia. And I didn't really see how the truth would help anyone in this case. "Indeed, it didn't come as out of the blue for me as it did for you."

Emma nodded, then she shrugged. "It'll have sunk in by our wedding. Two years is a long time."

"It is."

"A lot can happen before then," she said in a strange tone. Her eyes became distant as if she remembered something. I couldn't help but wonder if she was thinking about Cincinatti. Maybe she worried I'd change my mind and cancel our engagement, but I had no intention of doing that. From our short interactions, I could already tell that Emma was pleasant to be around, and she was very pretty.

"That's true, but some things won't as of today."

She tilted her head curiously but then glanced back out toward the backyard.

"You don't look happy with the engagement."

“And I should definitely be happy, considering everything.” Her voice had taken on an almost petulant tone.

I frowned, not sure why my words had affronted her. I pushed my hands into my pockets. It was strange thinking that this girl, then woman, would be my wife, my responsibility for the rest of our lives. I’d grown up with a strong sense of protection toward my twin sister, but she was gone—part of which was my fault. I wasn’t sure how I felt about being responsible for Emma. She’d already suffered a lot in her short life. Her tragic accident and her father’s death. Being married to me wouldn’t be the blessing and gift so many people believed it to be.

People judged me by my looks and my standing. They saw the shiny outside, not the abyss beneath the misleading outer layer.

“Are you?”

I slanted her a questioning look.

“Happy, I mean.” Her voice had become painfully quiet.

“Since when has happiness ever been a deciding factor when it comes to marriage in our world?” I asked. I didn’t want to lie to her and pretend this engagement made me ecstatic. Emma flinched. I considered saying something else to soften my words, but everything that came to mind would’ve sounded fake.

“It’s for the good of our families.”

She gave a small nod. “For the good of our families.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

One year later
17 years old

I hadn’t really dared to dream about this day, but I could finally pick out my wedding dress today.

Mom had already cried twice before we even set foot in the bridal store in the afternoon. Anna and Sofia joined us, as did Giorgia. She was the only one from my old group of friends I still met with. Most of the others had become estranged in the months after the accident. I had known many of them from ballet, and since I didn’t dance anymore… I didn’t want to dwell on it.

While I wasn’t as close to Anna and Sofia as Giorgia, I was still happy for their presence. If I’d had to go alone with Mom, this day would have quickly become strenuous.

When Mom and I entered the store, the sales associate gave me an encouraging smile, which had quite the opposite effect. Did she think it would be difficult to find something for me?

Luckily, Sofia and Anna were already there, perched on a plush white sofa and having champagne. Anna got up first, dressed in a plaid miniskirt and over-the-knee boots, and came over to hug me. “I’m so excited for you.”

I grinned, then motioned at her glass. “They ditched the drinking age for you?”

Anna gave me a coy smile, her blue eyes twinkling with mischief as she tossed her sleek brown hair over her shoulder. “I’m resourceful.” She turned to the small side table and filled two more glasses with champagne while Sofia hugged me. I almost asked her how things were going with her wedding planning, but I had a feeling that wasn’t the best topic right now. Things between her and Danilo seemed to be tense for whatever reason.

Anna handed me a champagne flute. “Here. Have a sip.”

Mom’s eyes widened in alarm when she stepped in, followed by the sales associate. I wasn’t sure what they’d had to discuss behind closed doors. Mom had probably preselected wedding gowns for me to try on. If I let her, she’d tell me what to wear down to my underwear.

Anna strode toward Mom and handed her the remaining flute with a conspiratorial smile. “We must celebrate today, don’t you think, Mrs. Mancini?”

Mom was immediately lost to Anna’s charming ways. Sofia rolled her eyes to the heavens and exchanged a look with Anna before we all clinked glasses. I took a sip from the bubbly liquid and felt a buzz spread through my body. I had been allowed to drink alcohol only twice before, so my body reacted immediately. But I was glad for the pleasant warmth and the way it soothed my nerves.

“Your friend Giorgia’s still missing, right?” Anna asked as she plopped back down on the sofa and threw one elegant leg over the other. I felt a brief pang but immediately shoved the notion aside.

“That girl has her priorities wrong,” Mom clipped. “She’s probably still having breakfast.”

Heat traveled up my throat on Giorgia’s behalf.

I was about to say something when Giorgia stumbled in a couple of minutes later, looking flushed and her long red hair all over the place. Her older brother gave me a brief nod before he disappeared without a word. She gave me a big grin and hugged me.

“She could be such a pretty girl if she just lost all that extra weight,” Mom whispered.

I gave her a warning look. “Mom.” I hated when people said I would be pretty if I wasn’t in a wheelchair, and Mom did exactly the same with Giorgia now.

Giorgia was curvy, definitely more curvy than was deemed acceptable in our world. Women were supposed to have a model figure, and I didn’t mean plus-sized models who slowly conquered the runways. Our world still only regarded skinny women as beautiful. The judgmental nature of our world often made me resent it, but it was the world I knew, and I couldn’t imagine leaving it.

Giorgia scanned the display of dresses before she sank down beside me in an armchair. “You’ll look gorgeous in all of these dresses. They are stunning.”

“We can come here when you marry.”

Giorgia gave me an amused look. “I don’t think that’ll be happening any time soon, and they don’t have dresses above size six here.”

“Oh,” I said. “We’ll find something.”

“Today’s your day, Emma. Pick the dress of your dreams.”

“Maybe something that’ll distract people from her wheelchair,” Mom said with a fretful expression.

Giorgia widened her eyes comically. I just shrugged. Mom didn’t mean to hurt me. She wanted me to experience things “like normal people do” as she once said to me. I didn’t have the courage to tell her that I’d feel normal if she didn’t treat me like I was not.

Luckily, the sales associate paid more attention to me than Mom’s constant comments.

I was nervous when I wheeled into the changing room to try on the first few dresses. “Do you need help?” the sales associate asked.

“I’ll help her,” Giorgia quickly said before Mom could do so. She stepped into the changing room with me and closed the curtain.

I gave her a grateful smile.

It took a while for us to close the delicate buttons in the back, and eventually, the sales associate helped as well, but when I turned to the mirror and saw myself, tears stung my eyes. The sales associate explained how we could still shorten the skirt and customize everything to my desires,

but I could only nod and stare. For some reason, I'd worried I wouldn't feel pretty in a wedding dress. I realized it was a silly concern now. But weddings in our world were bound by so many traditions that seemed to leave even less room for a girl like me.

Giorgia gave me a thumbs-up, beaming all over her face. I allowed my fingers to stroke the fine material of the skirt. It was sheer but with a fine sheen and in a beautiful eggshell color. The sales associate had discouraged me from wearing a sweeping underskirt because it would push up when I was seated in the wheelchair, and now, in a more flowy skirt, I had to agree with her. It looked elegant instead of like I'd tried to squeeze myself into a seat. "The embroidery is so beautiful. You look amazing," Giorgia said softly, her eyes actually glistening. She wasn't a crier, so I could feel my own eyes water at the sight of her show of emotion. I touched the fine lace edging, which accentuated the low sweetheart neckline. I'd never put this much focus on my décolletage, but I had to admit it had a nice effect.

Taking a deep breath, I wheeled out of the changing room. Anna set down her champagne glass, her mouth parting in an O. Sofia's expression brightened too. Of course, Mom being Mom, only gave a nod, then narrowed her eyes thoughtfully and began to circle me, looking for ways to let the wheelchair disappear.

"It's beautiful, it is," she said slowly. "But I wonder if a more sweeping dress would be better…"

"It's perfect!" Anna said as if she hadn't heard my mother. She got up and nodded appreciatively as she motioned to my waist. "The corset perfectly accentuates your narrow waist and décolletage. If you're up for it, I'd say you should wear really high heels."

I shrugged. "Why not? It's not like I'll have to walk in them."

Sofia and Anna looked uncertain if they should laugh, but Giorgia, knowing me better, burst out laughing. Mom's mouth pinched, but she took a few steps back, letting me spend time with the girls. She approached the sales associate. Despite what everyone else thought, I knew she'd ask for a sweeping dress.

Anna moved toward the shelves with pumps and picked a few elegant, pointy heels. She held up a pair of gorgeous Mary Jane pumps dressed in pearls and crystals. Seeing that they were Jimmy Choos, I knew the price

would match the extraordinarily slim heels and be outrageously high. Anna knelt before me. “May I?”

I nodded, a bit surprised as she put on the heels. I usually never wore heels. It had never made sense, but now, looking at myself in the mirror with these beautiful shoes, I regretted all the missed opportunities.

“Perfect!” Anna said.

“Yes,” I agreed, promising myself to wear heels more often in the future.

Mom urged me to try on three more dresses, but I couldn’t shake the image of the first dress I’d tried on, especially with the heels. I felt beautiful, so I picked my first choice despite Mom’s attempts to steer me toward another dress.

I wouldn’t try to cover up my wheelchair. I wanted to look beautiful in my wheelchair, and if people couldn’t see me like that because of a piece of metal, then that was their problem.

Still, I couldn’t deny that I wanted Samuel to find me beautiful.

Two months before the wedding, Samuel came to Indianapolis and visited me at our home. I still lived with Danilo even though that was supposed to be a temporary thing. Mom hadn’t coped very well after Dad’s death, and taking care of me—which she insisted on doing to an extent I definitely didn’t require—took too much of a toll on her. Danilo hadn’t minded letting me live with him, and I’d preferred it too. He worked a lot and didn’t hover like Mom did.

“What does he want?” I asked Danilo, who’d announced Samuel’s visit to me just an hour before it was supposed to happen. So typical. I had been busy crafting the origami flowers I wanted to use as place cards for our wedding tables. I was almost done with them but would have to start crafting the white cranes I wanted to use as decoration hanging from the ceilings over each table.

Danilo’s brows puckered. “I assume he wants to discuss last-minute details of the wedding.”

I almost laughed. Like most men in our world, Samuel hadn’t been involved with organizing the wedding. I hadn’t expected him to be. Maybe I’d hoped we’d be in contact now and then, but he’d simply given me carte blanche to do whatever I wanted. Mom had naturally taken him up on the offer and spent the past year organizing the wedding. She preferred to do things her way. Even I had a hard time giving her input. The number of arguments we’d had until I was allowed to create origami decorations for our wedding had been ridiculous.

I moved into my room on the first floor to put on some makeup and brush my hair. I was in a cozy but flattering cashmere dress and wool tights because the past few days had been cold. I grabbed my new pair of caramel-colored suede pumps from my wardrobe and put them on. After Anna’s encouraging words about me wearing high heels, I finally found the courage to buy these on my last shopping trip with Giorgia. I hadn’t dared to wear them yet, though, stupidly worried people would react badly.

I felt a sudden burst of nerves. I hadn’t been overly nervous about the wedding yet. Maybe because it had seemed so far away, and still like it might not happen at all, but now Samuel was here to discuss last-minute details.

My stomach tightened. What if he wasn’t here to discuss the wedding but the cancellation of it? I suddenly felt sick.

Samuel had known what he’d get when he agreed to marry me, but maybe, over time, he’d changed his mind. Maybe now that only two months remained, he realized that he’d spend the rest of his life with a disabled woman. I hated that the thought even crossed my mind, but Samuel and I didn’t know each other. Nothing bound us except for the promise between our families. I didn’t know what he thought of me. I knew what most people in our world thought of our bond, though, and it wasn’t very favorable.

I went into this bond completely blind, and so did he. Maybe he, like so many people, thought the wheelchair defined me and my every waking moment revolved around my disability.

I took a deep breath. I was being overdramatic. Samuel wouldn’t come to visit to tell me the wedding was canceled. He’d talk to my brother as the

master of our family, and Danilo would have warned me and probably raged like a madman if that were the case.

The bell rang. I'd spent too much time fretting over things that were unlikely to happen. Since my accident, I often felt anxious when I encountered a new situation. I shook my head. Everything would be all right. After a glance in the mirror to make sure I looked presentable, I left my room.

When I wheeled into the foyer, Samuel and Danilo were shaking hands. Their tense expressions would have renewed my worries if I didn't know that these two weren't friends, and thus, all of their encounters lacked enthusiastic greetings. They'd argued often in the past, even if I wasn't aware of the details. Maybe it was bound to happen because each man was marrying the other's sister.

Samuel glanced my way, and his smile became less tense, but it was still far from joyful or warm. He looked like the perfect ice prince in his beige coat, white dress shirt, and beige dress pants. I smiled, but it felt just as tense as the atmosphere in the lobby.

"Good afternoon, Emma," Samuel said with a small nod. I had to give it to him; he didn't look at my wheelchair in that awkward way some people did, but neither did he ignore it completely as if it offended him.

His gaze slid lower to my heels, and a hint of surprise crossed his face before he focused back on my face. "Good afternoon," I said quietly, my cheeks hot. Suddenly, I wished I hadn't worn the heels or, better yet, not bought them at all.

"You came here to talk about the wedding?" Danilo inquired in a tone that bordered on rude.

"I don't have much time. I'm returning to Minneapolis early in the morning…" Samuel trailed off.

"Let's go into the living room. We can discuss everything there," Danilo said.

Danilo went ahead toward the living room, leaving Samuel and me behind.

I wanted to say something clever, or at least mildly entertaining, but with Samuel's blue eyes trained on my face, I couldn't come up with anything. He motioned in the direction of the living room. "After you."

“Thank you,” I said and moved ahead. I could tell he was slowing his steps to stay behind me as his walk was usually more brisk, but I appreciated this small gesture. However, I wanted to see his expression, even if it was hard to read. At least it gave me a little something.

Danilo settled on an armchair, and I stopped next to him. Samuel removed his jacket and put it over the armrest of the sofa, then sat down. I had to resist the urge to stare. The dress shirt really looked great on his tall, muscled frame.

“What is it you want to discuss?” Danilo asked, tearing me from my thoughts.

“I’m in the process of renovating the house Emma and I will live in, and I wanted Emma’s input on certain design aspects to make sure she would feel at home.”

My eyes widened in utter surprise. Of course, I’d known we’d move in together but until now it had been a distant concept. Now it suddenly became very real. And I had to admit I was incredibly touched that Samuel had thought about ways to make the house accessible for me.

“If it’s a two-story house, then you need to install an elevator so she can reach the upper floor. There’s a lot to keep in mind. Ramps into the backyard and out of the front door.”

I glanced between them, growing increasingly frustrated over their discussing things as if I weren’t present. “An elevator would be good,” I said firmly, causing both men to look my way. Samuel’s unwavering attention drove heat into my cheeks, but I returned his gaze. “A floor-level shower, wider doors, a lower kitchen counter and sinks, handles beside the toilet…” I trailed off. Then because I didn’t want him to think of all the difficulties my disability might cause him, I added, “Once the house is accessible, I can live a completely independent and normal life.”

Samuel nodded. “It’ll be done.”

“Maybe you should ask for help from an architect who has experience with this?” I suggested.

“Do you know someone?” Samuel asked, surprising me.

“Not in Minneapolis, no. But I could ask around…”

“I’ll handle it,” Samuel said firmly. “Don’t worry.”

Danilo’s phone buzzed, and he got up. “Excuse me for a moment.” His eyes cut to me, asking if it was okay. *I’ll be fine*, I told him with my

expression, and he left.

When he was out of the room, I became acutely aware that talking to Samuel was up to me. I gave him a nervous smile. I couldn't read his expression as he regarded me. "Only two more months," I said for lack of anything else to say, and flushed. Our last conversation had felt strained, and Samuel's words back then had only confirmed my suspicion that he wasn't too happy about our bond.

"Not much time," he said neutrally. "Especially considering that Sofia and Danilo marry two weeks before us. That's plenty of planning between our two families."

"Our moms can handle it."

"They do," he said, then his eyes cut to my heels again. "I've never seen you with heels before."

My cheeks blasted with heat. I nervously tucked a strand behind my ear. "Yeah. This is actually my first pair. I like how they look."

Samuel looked back up to my face and smiled slightly. "I do too."

I blinked, not sure if he'd complimented me or if he simply meant he liked the heels, but not how they looked on me. God, I was overthinking this again.

"I'm glad," I whispered. We looked at each other, and Samuel's eyes seemed to trace my face. I wished I knew what he was thinking.

"Sofia has been practicing walking in heels for weeks now. She still complains they are torture devices."

I shrugged. "I won't have to worry about that."

His expression became tight.

"One less worry, right?" I gave him a grin to show him he didn't need to walk on eggshells around me.

"Indeed," he said, and for a moment, his lips pulled into a real smile. But then Danilo returned, so Samuel's expression returned to being tightly controlled.

He glanced at his watch. "I should go now. I'm sure you have plenty to do as well." He got up and grabbed his jacket from the armrest but didn't put it back on. Instead, he threw it over his shoulder.

Danilo and I walked him to the front door. Samuel gave my brother a nod, then turned to me. "I'll see you at your brother and Sofia's wedding."

I smiled. "See you then."

He left, and I stared down at the engagement ring that Samuel had sent me in a package a few weeks after our engagement announcement. I wished he'd given it to me and even slipped it on, but I consoled myself with the fact that Danilo could be an emotional brick too. Samuel probably didn't even realize that it had hurt my feelings to be sent the ring like that.

Danilo touched my shoulder. I glanced up at his worried face. "Samuel will be good to you."

"I'm not worried." At least not about Samuel treating me badly. What worried me was that he would be cold or emotionally detached. That he'd never want to be with me in a physical sense. That he'd cheat on me. That he'd see me as a burden and not his wife.

I couldn't share any of those concerns with Danilo. He would only try to talk to Samuel and probably do more damage.

I had to figure this out on my own.

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CHAPTER SIX

I approached Danilo, who was immersed in his work as usual. “I want to walk down the aisle.”

The idea first crossed my mind shortly after Samuel’s visit and had festered ever since.

Danilo looked up from the papers, confused at first and then concerned.

“Emma—” He began as if he was trying to explain to a little kid that her legs didn’t work.

I narrowed my eyes. “I know my body and what it’s capable of. I don’t want to walk down the entire length, just the last few steps from the first row of pews to Samuel. I want to meet him at eye level.” He would still be a head taller, but I had always imagined walking down the aisle, and while that wasn’t possible, I wanted to do what my body was capable of.

I’d spent endless hours in physical therapy, strapped into a harness that kept me upright as my feet barely dragged over the treadmill. I’d cried tears of frustration over my body’s inability to heal completely and tears of gratitude for how far it had come from my almost entirely immobile state after the car accident. But I knew with absolute certainty that my body

couldn’t do more than what it was capable of now. I’d made peace with it and didn’t hope for a miracle to carry me down the aisle to Samuel.

My iron will would do that, at least a few steps. I knew it would be impossible to walk all the way down the aisle, but I wanted to stand before the altar for a few seconds. This was my wedding, and I wanted to make this the day I imagined.

Danilo looked doubtful.

“I did some research.” While in our world, my marriage to Samuel was pretty much a novel thing as most disabled women so far had remained spinsters, the outside world was more progressive, and I’d watched countless weddings with a disabled bride or groom to see options. It has given me renewed hope, not just for the festivities but also for my marriage.

“I could wear leg braces,” I said.

“You had them before and hated them.”

He was right. In the beginning, Mom had insisted I wear them. She found them less obvious than the wheelchair, but I’d never liked them. They’d been more hindrance than help, and I didn’t mind sitting in my wheelchair most of the time as it allowed me to reach most places quickly. “I don’t want to wear them daily. I’m just thinking about wearing them in church so I can walk the few steps.”

It was only a small gesture, a tiny moment in time, but I hoped it would show Samuel that we could be partners at eye level. In our world, so many people had trouble seeing me as an independent grown-up woman for the simple fact that I had a disability. And the little girl who dreamed of being a princess wanted to stand in her wedding dress for a moment. The dreamer and the realist in me wanted the same thing for once, which showed me how important it was for me. I was used to compromise, but I didn’t want to concede on this.

Danilo got up and leaned against the edge of the desk to be closer to me. “Emma, even with leg braces, you can hardly walk. You’d need something to hold on to.”

“I could use a walker or maybe even a cane.”

“A walker could work, but even those few steps could be strenuous in a heavy dress, and it would take a long time.”

I swallowed. Danilo wasn’t trying to hurt me or be unkind. He was simply analyzing the situation in his usual manner. “I still have six weeks. I

could train daily with an evening gown to simulate my wedding dress."

Danilo sighed. "We need to talk to Mom first. She's planned every second of that day in detail. Your plans will change the timing."

I stifled a smile. Of course, Danilo wanted to be as accurate as possible. His expression remained stern and worried.

"Can you ask her to come over for dinner today?"

Danilo sighed but picked up his phone. I gave him a big smile.

"Don't get excited yet. You know Mom."

Danilo was proven right when I told Mom about my plan.

Her eyes widened as if I'd suggested walking naked into church. "A walking frame would ruin your outfit."

"If a wheelchair doesn't ruin my outfit, I doubt a walker does," I said teasingly, but Mom wasn't in the mood for jokes. Not that she was ever in the mood to joke about my wheelchair. For her, it was always dead serious.

"We could wrap the walker in white silk and decorate it with flowers," I added.

Mom pursed her lips. "That could work." She paused, and I knew I wouldn't like her next words. "But Emma. You have two minutes for the walk down the aisle. That's the length of the music piece I've picked for your entry. With your wheelchair, you can easily stay within the timeframe, but if you try to walk?"

"It'll take longer, yes. But I'll only walk a few steps. That takes maybe two minutes longer."

Mom shook her head. "Getting out of your wheelchair, smoothing your dress, taking the walking frame and then walking a few steps…that could take three to five minutes."

I looked down at my hands. "I know."

"You can't make people wait. They'll be bored, and it'll be awkward for them. You know how it is."

“I know,” I muttered. “We don’t want to bother them with the sight of my disabled body for too long lest they feel uncomfortable.”

Mom glanced at Danilo as if she hoped he’d come to her help, but he was watching me closely. My face probably gave away how close to tears I was. I had grown used to my wheelchair. I could do almost anything I wanted with it, but for my wedding day? I just wished I could walk down a small part of the aisle, even if it was at a snail’s pace.

“Emma,” Mom said softly. “Think about Samuel.”

I pressed my lips together. “You’re right. He’s the groom. It matters what he thinks. But it should matter what the bride wants too.” My voice cracked at the end.

“I’ll talk to Samuel,” Danilo said.

I shook my head. “I want to be present. Call him and put him on speakerphone.” I didn’t want Danilo to blackmail Samuel.

Danilo looked reluctant, but he dialed Samuel’s number.

“Yes?” Samuel asked in a clipped voice.

“Evening, Samuel. I’m here with my mother and Emma, and we want to discuss the wedding with you.”

“All right,” Samuel said slowly. I could hear the rustling of papers in the background. He was probably busy. “What is it?”

“I would like to walk down the last part of the aisle with the help of a walker,” I said quickly before Danilo or Mom could talk for me. “And I wanted to make sure you are aware of my plans.”

“Is that possible?” Samuel asked with a hint of surprise.

“I can’t walk without support,” I said. “I’m very slow and would need a walker, like I said.”

“It could very well take five minutes. People would have to wait a long time,” Mom butted in. “We understand if you don’t want that.”

Silence. Anger and frustration swelled in me. Mom always worried so much about what other people thought, but she rarely stopped to think what I wanted.

“They can wait for the bride on her wedding day. I don’t see a problem. We can cut short the congratulations afterward. They are a drag anyway,” Samuel said as if it wasn’t a big deal, when it meant the world to me.

I bit my lip to stifle a smile at Mom’s stunned expression.

“That’s it?” Samuel asked after a moment, sounding as if he was already busy with something else.

His curt manner didn’t even bother me today. I was just happy that his reaction showed Mom that my wishes were relevant.

It was only three days until the wedding. Giorgia sat in the first row of the church to time me. I was grateful that she took the time to help me. In the beginning, Mom had been there as well, but her presence had been more discouraging than anything else. Now that Danilo was married to Sofia, I spent every day with Mom, and it made me anxious.

“You did it. Faster than last time.”

I nodded and smiled proudly as I sank down on the wheelchair. “I’m getting used to the dress.” I was grateful for what my body had done today. I had ditched the leg braces very early on in our practice and only used a walker.

“Maybe Danilo could even lead you a few steps, then you wouldn’t have to use the walker?”

“I don’t think that would work. He’d have to support most of my weight.”

Giorgia stepped to my left side and held out her arm. “Let’s try it.”

I held on to it and pulled myself into a standing position. My body ached. I wouldn’t be able to practice much more today, but I channeled all of my remaining power so we could practice a few more times without the walker. Danilo was much stronger than Giorgia, so the chances were high that he could steady me even more.

Giorgia spent the night with us. Her brother had work to do, and her mother lived most of the year in Italy, having abandoned Giorgia with her brother and his wife.

“Are you excited?” Giorgia asked as we settled on my bed after dinner to watch a movie.

“Nervous,” I admitted.

Giorgia tilted her head. “Because he’s an ice prince?”

I shrugged. “Because I hardly know him, and I still don’t believe that Danilo didn’t force Samuel in some way. It doesn’t make sense to establish a second bond between our families. It doesn’t accomplish anything.”

“Maybe you should just leave it be. Even if there was some deal between your brother and Samuel, that doesn’t mean your marriage can’t be real. I mean, it could be worse. He’s hot at least. The bachelors Mom suggested so far are at least twice my age, divorced or widowed, and live in Italy. I don’t want to move, and I don’t want to settle. Mom wants someone who can finance her luxurious lifestyle, and apparently, only old fools are willing to do that for me.”

I huffed. “You are beautiful inside and out. She’s not looking in the right places. Your curves are spectacular.”

Giorgia jiggled her boobs. “Mom says men only like jiggle in certain places.”

I burst out laughing. “Your jiggle is very impressive. Maybe we can find you a match at my wedding.”

“You focus on you. I’ll eventually find someone.”

“We caught a Camorrista. He was trying to sabotage some of the gaming machines in my clubs,” Renato said as he entered my father’s and my office

in the back of our biggest casino ship. In the beginning, the gentle sway of the ship had been unnerving, but by now, I was used to spending part of my day on water.

Gambling and whores were the golden combination when it came to making money, which was why Renato swam in it.

Dad peered up from a stack of papers with the forged receipts of our bars from our head accountant. His eyes met mine. “You can question him.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. Whenever a Camorrista was caught near or in Minneapolis, I made sure I got my hands on him. It wasn’t the same as torturing Remo Falcone, but it was better than nothing.

“He’s mimicking our tactic,” I muttered as I jumped into Renato’s vintage Jaguar.

“Because it’s a good one.”

“Because he’s mocking us,” I contradicted, feeling a familiar fury burn in the pit of my stomach at the thought of Remo Falcone.

Over the years, our war with the Camorra had become less active. Too many soldiers had lost their lives since the war had begun. Dante preferred to hurt the Camorra’s business nowadays and no longer tried to kill the Falcone brothers. Of course, if we managed to get our hands on one of them again, that might change.

I sometimes wondered what I would do if I ran across Remo Falcone. I wanted nothing more than to kill him for what he’d done, for what he’d taken from me. Unfortunately, I knew by killing him, I’d hurt Serafina. She wouldn’t magically stop loving him because I killed him. Worse, she’d probably romanticize his whole existence even more than before. She had forgiven him for kidnapping her, something I could never do and could not understand.

Sometimes I thought I’d kill him anyway. I’d kill him for Enea, Arlo, and Domenico. I owed it to them. They had given their lives for me and my sister. Remo had murdered them, yet they hadn’t been avenged.

“Did you listen to a word I just said?”

I gave Renato a look. He parked the car in front of an Outfit warehouse where we kept bar and restaurant supplies, but in its underbelly, cells for questioning had been set up.

“How are wedding preparations coming along?”

“Good?”

Renato snorted. “You have no clue.”

I shrugged. “I have more important things on my mind than matching napkins to candles.” I got out of the car, and Renato joined me soon after.

He grinned. “What about your bride? You never talk to me about her. Have you made any progress? Are you excited about the wedding night?”

I cocked an eyebrow. Renato and I were used to chatting about our affairs and one-night stands. He obviously thought I’d keep up that kind of talk about my future wife.

“With that face, she’s a ten out of ten. The wheelchair makes me really curious about certain positions, though—”

I shoved him so hard he slammed against the side of his car, then got in his face. “We’re best friends, and I’d die for you, but that doesn’t mean I won’t kick your ass for disrespecting my fiancée. So stop talking about her like that.”

Renato raised his palms. “You’re right.”

I took a step back and blew out a breath. He was right. Emma was incredibly beautiful, and if I allowed myself to think about our wedding night, I’d be eager as hell, but my mind was elsewhere, and right now, Emma wasn’t mine yet. She wasn’t even of age yet, so I simply wouldn’t entertain those distracting thoughts.

We entered the warehouse after entering a code into a panel, then crossed one of the aisles to the end of the vast hall until we reached a flap door. A steep staircase led to a basement. The flickering halogen lights stung my eyes as we followed a guard’s pointing finger toward a cell to our right. Inside, we found a no-name from the Camorra. Some lowly soldier from Kansas City. It was the Camorra city closest to our territory.

Several years ago, we’d killed the Underboss there and tried to kill the new one too. Now things were less potent.

Only men like the one in front of me died nowadays. We contented ourselves with pissing each other off. Maybe one day, I’d get the chance to kill another Camorrista of importance.

The Camorrista in front of me sat on the floor and stared up at me with prideful and stubborn eyes. He was trying to make his Capo proud, no doubt. Torture would break him like it broke all of them. All but Remo Falcone. Thinking of how I’d tortured him to within an inch of his life was

still one of the fucking best moments of my life, followed by the fucking worst when my twin sister saved him.

I shrugged out of my suit jacket and draped it over a hook on the wall, then began to roll up my sleeves.

The man sneered up at me. “I bet you can’t sleep at night because you dream about how Remo sticks his cock into your sister’s holes.”

I stalked toward him, grabbed him by the throat, and dragged him to his feet. Renato grabbed his arms and pulled them behind his back.

“Your Capo would cut off your tongue and stick it in your ass for speaking those words.”

The man swallowed, but he simply returned my gaze.

“Don’t worry, I’m not getting anywhere near your hairy asshole. I’m not into that kind of stuff.”

“Unless it’s a pretty lady,” Renato said with a grin.

“And cutting off your tongue will have to wait until later. First, we need to have a nice long chat, don’t you agree?” I pulled out my knife, cocked an eyebrow, then dug the tip into the skin beneath his eye, drawing blood. “I asked you a question, and from now on, I expect answers, or you’ll lose all those parts of your body you don’t need for our conversation.”

Blood trickled down his cheek as my knife sank deeper into his skin. He gritted his teeth, wincing. “Fuck you,” he ground out.

I smirked. “Not the answer I wanted.” I cut off his earlobe. I needed to pace myself. Starting with his eyeballs posed the risk of too much blood loss.

He let out a choked cry and struggled in Renato’s hold.

“I hope you’ll be more talkative now.” He didn’t say anything. I tossed the earlobe to the ground and picked up my phone, calling one of the guards. “Bring the rats.”

The eyes of the Camorrista filled with disgust and panic. The guard dropped off a transport box with three rats. I opened it, then tossed the earlobe to the ground. Immediately, a fight between the three rats broke out over the piece of meat. They hadn’t been fed since yesterday and hadn’t had any protein in several days.

I gave our captive a pleasant smile. “They’re very hungry. I’m sure they won’t mind if you keep up your muteness.”

One of the rats scuttled over to us and climbed up the man's leg. He began to freak out, trying to shake her off, his eyes going wide in disgust.

"Maybe this one didn't get fed yesterday either," I mused when the rat reached our captive's shoulder and tried to reach the bleeding ear.

"Our pifferaio magico trained them well!" Renato said with a laugh. He was referring to one of our guards who bred and trained rats, which was why we called him the pied piper of Hamelin. Father had been reluctant to use rats for torture in the beginning as he found it tasteless, but now he saw their value.

Three hours later, the rats were well fed, and the Camorrista was near death. His breathing was labored as I knelt beside him to end his miserable life in an act of mercy. "Your sister is sucking Remo's dick every day. Maybe once he grows tired of her, he'll kidnap your wife and teach her how to suck dick."

My fingers around the knife tightened, my pulse racing in my veins. I shoved to my feet. "Let the rats have him. It'll take a few hours for him to bleed to death. They like their meat fresh."

I walked out of the cell. Renato followed me and locked the door behind him.

"Want to grab a drink?"

I pulled a flask from my jacket and took a sip of vodka. "I have a drink with me, but I'd be up for a few more."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Samuel

Emma looked breathtaking in her wedding dress. It accentuated her narrow waist and elegant bone structure, something I'd never paid attention to with a woman before. Her brown hair hung in shiny curls down her shoulders and was adorned with pearls.

She held her head high as she moved down the aisle in her wheelchair by Danilo's side. The way she moved it along, she seemed to float toward me. Beside the first row of seats, she stopped and arrested the brakes. She exchanged a look with Danilo, who gave a curt nod, then held out his arm to her. She reached down to her heels and took them off. She put them on the footboards, then put her bare feet on the floor. She pushed herself into a standing position, and a hush fell over the church. Even though Emma had hinted at it in our last phone call, it still came as a surprise to see Emma rise to her feet. She held her head high, a smile on her face, but I caught the hint of strain in her eyes. This wasn't easy for her, but she took Danilo's arm, then slowly put a leg forward.

It was the first time I saw her standing and in her dress. The effect was spectacular. I held out my arm for her to hold on to, and her fingers dug into

my forearm. I covered her hand with mine to steady her and hold as much of her weight as possible. Luckily, she was petite, so I had no trouble supporting her. She gave me a small, grateful smile. It was admirable how she fought for what she wanted. Together, we faced the priest. Her chest heaved from the obvious effort of standing. It drew my attention to the enticing neckline of her wedding dress.

Until now, I hadn't paid much attention to Emma's body. But I allowed my gaze to discover her now. She was elegant, with high cheekbones and an almost fairy-like aura.

Danilo and Renato positioned chairs behind us, and I helped Emma sit before I took my seat beside her. Emma kept her eyes on the priest throughout the ceremony, but I kept glancing her way.

The priest seemed to talk forever, but eventually, it was time for the vows.

I held out my arm to her once more and helped her pull herself to her feet. Her fingers shook as we exchanged the rings, making me feel very protective of my young wife.

"You may kiss the bride."

I put one hand on her waist, steadying her even more. I could tell that she was reaching the end of her strength. She tilted her head up with an uncertain smile. I leaned down and pressed my lips against hers. Her lips were pliable, and she yielded to my pressure. The delicate blush on her cheeks awakened a primal part in me that I had restrained so far.

"I need to sit down," Emma whispered apologetically.

I helped her into the wheelchair that Danilo had pushed to the front. She arranged her dress, then peered up at me with a hesitant smile. The music that Emma's mother had picked for our walk out of church began. I held out my hand, and Emma put her hand in it, then I gave a nod, and she began moving. I matched my pace to hers. I could see that some people were still surprised that this wedding had happened. When we reached the outside, a gentle rain was falling. I quickly opened the umbrella that my father handed me and held it over Emma.

"We postponed the congratulations to later in the hotel!" Dad announced.

For all I cared, we could have canceled them altogether. This was usually the most insincere part of every wedding, except for the actual vows

of love, perhaps.

I held the door open to the limousine.

“Can you help me? It’s harder to get into the car with this dress.”

My mother and I helped Emma into the back seat, and I joined her.

Silence settled between us once the doors were closed, and we were on our way. I didn’t mind silence, but I knew many people did. I glanced at Emma beside me. She was breathtaking. Her hair shone like silk, and her skin was immaculate. My gaze moved lower to the enticing neckline of her dress and the valley between her breasts, then I looked back up. Emma regarded me with a shy smile. “We’re married.” She let out a nervous laugh. She reminded me of her much younger age at that moment. Only eighteen. Yet she had appeared more grown-up in many of our previous encounters, so it had been easy to forget our age difference.

“Indeed.” I cleared my throat. It was obvious Emma was overwhelmed, and we still had a long day ahead of us. “You don’t have to worry. Our mothers planned every moment of today. We just have to follow their cues. And the guests won’t care about mishaps as long as there’s food and alcohol.”

I reached under my jacket for the flask Renato had handed me before the ceremony and unscrewed it. “Do you mind?”

She quickly shook her head and watched as I took a couple of gulps. It was my favorite whisky. Lagavulin. Strong enough to burn your throat but delicious.

I held out the flask to Emma. “Liquid courage?”

Emma hesitated, then took the flask from me. She took a sip and immediately started coughing, her face turning red. She handed the flask back to me. “What is it?” she pressed out.

“Whisky.” I took another gulp.

“That tastes like methylated spirit.”

“Trust me, it doesn’t. I have firsthand knowledge from people I interrogated.”

Emma’s eyes widened, then she nodded. Danilo’s treatment of enemies wasn’t for the faintheartedeither, but I wasn’t sure how much of his business Emma knew about. “Why do you need it? Are you nervous?”

Was I nervous? This was a monumental step in my life. I was now bound to a woman. Some men didn’t change their actions, but I respected

the holy bond of marriage. “No,” I said simply because it was the truth. What came next was the standard social exchange of pleasantries that I detested. What came after was something I’d figure out then. “Are you?”

She bit her lip and cast her eyes down to the ring around her finger. “I have been nervous since I found out I was promised to you.”

I frowned. Her reaction to our bond had been lackluster from the start. Some people wondered why, but I had never really expected Emma to be overjoyed. “Why?”

She looked out the window, obviously unsure how much to share.

“You won’t offend me. Even your brother hasn’t succeeded in a while.”

Emma let out a choked laugh and turned back to me. “I don’t understand why you two detest each other so much. You aren’t so different.”

“I reckon that’s the problem,” I said with a shrug. Though, I didn’t really think that Danilo and I were really very much alike. We were alphas. That was the only thing we had in common. “But you’re avoiding my question. Why were you nervous when you found out we were promised? Would you have preferred to marry someone else or not at all?”

“No, neither,” she said and blushed. “You’re older and more experienced in many regards, so that’s definitely a factor.”

I could tell that wasn’t the entire truth. “That’s not a disadvantage,” I said in a low voice. I could have said more, but I didn’t feel we were quite there yet. I wasn’t sure how to handle her.

She looked down at her hands with a thoughtful expression. “You’re very aloof. I worry it’ll be hard to break through your shell.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted her to succeed. She wished for this deep sort of connection, and whenever I saw my parents share a moment, I, too, wished for it, but this level of intimacy brought risks. “We’re there.”

Emma glanced my way as if hoping for an answer, but I didn’t want to give her false hope.

My eyes took in the ivy-covered front of the Van Delden Mansion we'd picked as our wedding venue. It was the best hotel in Minneapolis. Samuel had merely agreed but not really been involved in the decision-making. My heart filled with joy at the sight of the facade made of pink Sioux quartzite. It was a place I expected to find in the French countryside or in England, but not in downtown Minneapolis. I'd fallen in love with the venue the moment Ines had sent me photos of it, and I'd convinced my mother to agree even though the ballroom had a limit of 175 guests.

The driver took my wheelchair out of the trunk, and Samuel helped me sit down. I tilted my head up, taking in the impressive building. The rain had stopped, which was fortunate, considering we wanted to take wedding photos in the garden. Samuel pushed me down the pathway that led to the gardens. Our photographer waited for us beside a gazebo. My mother and Ines joined us soon after.

"You can access the gazebo with your wheelchair," the photographer said.

Mom stepped forward with a tight smile. "I think Emma should stand for the photos. We want wedding photos without the wheelchair."

We? *We* had never discussed that.

Ines glanced from my mother to me and Samuel. I flushed, feeling on the spot.

Samuel moved to my side. "Is that what you want?"

My heart swelled. I ignored Mom's pinched expression. This was my day. "I would like a mix of both. Me in my wheelchair and me standing beside you."

"How about we take a few photos in your wheelchair in the gazebo, and then we'll try a few standing photos on the stairs?" the photographer suggested.

I could tell my mother was offended that we didn't follow her lead.

We moved into the gazebo, then Samuel and I gazed toward the photographer, hoping for directions.

"How about you kneel in front of Emma and take her hands?" Ines suggested.

Samuel got down on his knees. Luckily, the inside of the gazebo was dry so he wouldn't ruin his suit. He took my hands. His felt warm while mine were cold and a little stiff.

"Give us some emotions," the photographer encouraged. "Look deeply into each other's eyes as if you're sharing a secret."

I met Samuel's gaze, feeling awkward. How were we supposed to convey emotions that weren't there? I was attracted to Samuel and maybe even had a little crush on him, but I didn't love him. And he definitely didn't have any feelings for me. This was an arranged marriage, not blissful love. Samuel's features softened in a smile, but it was still a very restrained expression, and my own face felt very tense.

"More emotions," the photographer said as she took several photos.

Samuel glared. "Do your job. This isn't helping."

She snapped her lips shut and continued taking photos.

Samuel looked down at my hands, which were still in his. "Your hands are icy. We should hurry to get you inside." He looked up with concern in his eyes.

"It's not very cold. It's summer." It was a cool day for May, but my cold hands were from nerves, not because I was freezing.

"That's it!" the photographer said, and the *click-click* of more photos being taken sounded. "That's a wrap on this set."

Samuel raised an eyebrow and pushed to his feet, releasing my hands in the process. My eyes registered Danilo. He stood a few steps to the side, watching us. Sofia wasn't with him. They had married recently, but it was pretty obvious they'd had a rough start. Seeing them together today, I got

the impression that things between them were improving. Danilo didn't share these things with me, and I wasn't close enough to Sofia yet to ask her about it. Not to mention that I'd feel awkward doing so as Danilo's sister.

Danilo gave me a tight smile before his hard gaze settled on Samuel, who returned it with an unimpressed expression.

"The stairs next!" the photographer said, moving ahead.

Samuel pushed me toward the base of the stairs. I arrested the brakes and pushed myself into a standing position. I realized I was still in my heels and couldn't keep my balance on them. Danilo stepped forward as if to catch me, but Samuel grabbed my arm before he could and steadied me with a hand on my waist.

"I need to get out of my heels," I explained, embarrassed.

I sank down and quickly slipped off my heels before I stood again. Samuel helped me reach one of the upper stairs and positioned himself beside me. Ines fanned out my wedding dress so it cascaded down the steps. I was a bit nervous standing on the stairs as it allowed less room for stumbling. Samuel gripped my hands. "I'll catch you if you fall."

I couldn't help but smile at his declaration. "That's very romantic of you," I teased.

Samuel chuckled. "I'm going to be honest. Being romantic isn't my forte. At all."

"You're the ice prince."

He scoffed. "That name has followed me for years."

"It fits," I said, my eyes tracing his blond hair, cold blue eyes, and cool expression. If I had to pick someone to play a Nordic god, I would choose him. "You look and act like one. I thought you liked it. From what I hear, girls do." I hadn't wanted to bring up other girls but couldn't help the little jab. I knew the stories about his conquests.

"They like the illusion. They like thinking they could melt my cold heart. Because it would make them special." He rolled his eyes.

"Don't you want someone to melt your cold heart?" I asked in a mere whisper, not sure why I chose to pick this topic on our wedding day. It was bound to end in disaster.

Samuel slanted a look at the photographer, who lowered her camera and motioned for us to move on to the fountain. "No. I don't."

"Oh."

“We’re running out of time!” Mom pointed at the gold watch around her wrist.

Samuel sighed and picked me up without warning. He carried me down the stairs and toward the fountain. Being pressed up to his body like that sent a nervous shiver down my back, and my cheeks flushed.

“Just like this!” The photographer lifted her camera. “Don’t move.”

She took several photos of me in Samuel’s arms. “I think this is enough,” Samuel said, putting me down in my wheelchair. He didn’t wait for the photographer to agree. Instead, he pushed me up the ramp that led into the ballroom of the hotel that we’d rented for the occasion. The guests had gathered at their respective tables and were busy chatting and drinking champagne or wine. Our photo session had taken a while.

Immediately, everyone’s eyes moved to us. I was used to being stared at and didn’t even mind today. Most faces were friendly, and I simply ignored the occasional grudging expression. I wanted to enjoy today. When Samuel and I arrived at our table, he noticed the origami cranes hanging from the ceiling above the center of every round table.

“I’ve never seen wedding decor like this.”

Nerves filled my belly. His thoughtful expression didn’t reveal if he liked them or not.

“Emma insisted on having them. She even folded them herself! As if we didn’t have the necessary funds to buy decorations,” Mom said in a scandalous whisper.

I stifled my annoyance. We’d still spent a five-figure sum on decorations from flowers to balloons.

Samuel glanced at me. “You did these?”

“Yes, I’ve been doing origami for six years.”

He looked impressed. Hope bloomed in me. “I like it.”

“The cranes symbolize happiness and eternal youth. They are luck bringers.”

“Do you think we need additional luck for our wedding?” he asked, mildly amused.

I shrugged. “Who doesn’t?”

Mom pursed her lips, then her eyes registered on a server who stood off to the side with a tray. “Why’s she taking a break?” She went off to give someone else a piece of her mind.

Danilo and Sofia joined us at that moment. Danilo watched Mother's departure with a frown, then raised his eyebrow. "What happened?"

"She was displeased that Samuel didn't hate my origami decoration like she does."

Danilo shook his head with a look of displeasure. Sofia stood beside him, but they didn't touch. Not that Samuel and I were holding hands or the like.

"I would have hidden my dislike in front of your mother even if I'd felt it. A husband should have his wife's back," Samuel said simply.

I narrowed my eyes. "So you lied?"

"No, I really like them. But I would lie to others to have your back."

I bit my lip, secretly pleased. "As long as you don't lie to me."

"I can be very honest."

Danilo made a face as if he doubted that. I gave him a curious look, but he simply smiled tightly.

"I think they are spectacular and gorgeous. If I'd known you could do these, I would have asked you to craft them for our wedding." Sofia pursed her lips. "Though, they probably take forever to fold, right?"

"It took me a while, but I would have done it for you and Danilo."

I positioned my wheelchair closer to the table as Mom signaled for us to sit down for dinner. Sofia sat beside me, and Danilo was beside her. I insisted she sat beside me because I didn't want to bear Mom's admonishments all evening. Samuel sat down on my other side, and soon, his parents and my mother took the remaining seats.

Samuel's father rose to his feet when all the guests found their seats. As Underboss and the father of the groom, he'd give a little speech first before Samuel would open the dinner.

The attention shifted to Samuel and me as he mentioned how happy he and Ines were about our bond.

"We can't wait to become grandparents and hopefully have a grandson who will continue the Mione legacy."

Samuel's lips tightened, and I noticed how Ines nudged her husband under the table and sent him a warning look. His confused expression told me he wasn't sure what he'd done wrong.

To be honest, it was a pretty standard thing to say for a patriarch at his son's wedding. I've heard a similar phrase at countless weddings. But with

the continued rumors about my infertility, a comment like that only added fuel to the gossip fire.

At many tables, people exchanged looks or even whispered, but Samuel shoved to his feet and clanged his knife against his wineglass with a bit more force than necessary.

“Let the feast begin. I’m sure we all need a drink and good food.”

He sank back down and gave me a tight smile.

When the service crew streamed in with the appetizers—deviled quail eggs with caviar and more champagne to go with it—Sofia leaned over to me. “I’m sorry for what Dad said. The men in my family can be horribly insensitive.”

I gave her a small smile. “The men in my family as well.”

She followed my gaze toward Danilo, who regarded the tiny appetizer with disdain. “I hope the portion sizes increase.”

Mom gave him an indignant look. “We have six more courses. I didn’t raise you to be a barbarian.”

I stifled my laughter.

Samuel wasn’t as restrained. He let out a dry chuckle. “I guess you haven’t seen Danilo’s barbaric side very often then.”

“No talk about business at the table,” Ines said firmly. “This isn’t wedding talk.”

Sofia and I exchanged a look, both trying to stop ourselves from grinning. I had to admit I was sad that Sofia wouldn’t be in Minneapolis. She and I would have bonded even more over time.

I worried about making friends, especially as good and loyal as my bestie Giorgia. I searched the ballroom until my eyes settled on her beside her brother. She met my gaze and raised her eyebrows comically as she took a delicate bite of the tiny egg.

God, I’d miss her.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

After dinner, the dance floor was prepared for the following festivities. My stomach tightened with nerves. This was actually the part of the wedding I was the most nervous about—maybe not the most… that was the wedding night. But I worried about how Samuel and I would master our dance. Of course, I could move to the music in my wheelchair—I had done so often with Giorgia when we'd partied to our favorite songs in our rooms—but I'd never danced *with* someone while in a wheelchair. Samuel and I had never practiced doing so, and I feared rolling over his feet while trying to dance with him. Mom looked ready to combust with nerves. She was probably even more worried than me about all the possible things that could go wrong.

When everything was set up, Samuel leaned toward me. "I'll carry you toward the dance floor, and if you think you can do it, I'll help you through the song."

I swallowed and gave a nod. "If you hold me up, I can do a song."

"All right," Samuel murmured and rose to his feet. Everyone's eyes settled on us, but I ignored them. I wanted this moment to be Samuel's and

mine. I didn’t want other people’s judgment to ruin this for me. I motioned at my heels. I doubted I could stand a single moment on them. My balance was too impaired. Samuel understood and got down on one knee in front of me. Heat shot into my cheeks when he touched my ankle and carefully slid my heels off. I couldn’t feel his touch, but I still felt a flood of tingles shoot through my body. Samuel straightened once more and picked me up as if it was the easiest thing in the world. I wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pressed my other hand against his chest, not because I needed to steady myself but because it felt good to feel his steady heartbeat and strength.

When we arrived on the dance floor, Samuel carefully put me on my feet, but he held most of my weight until I found my balance. Yet even then, he still firmly held on to my waist. “Ready?” he asked in a low voice, his blue eyes locking on mine. A low murmur had picked up among the guests, but I still didn’t look. I only had eyes for Samuel, my husband. It was still difficult to wrap my mind around the fact that I was a married woman now.

“Yes.”

My heartbeat was racing, and my mouth was becoming increasingly dry. Samuel gave a sign to the band, and they played the first notes of the slow waltz. I’d danced the waltz often before but never like this, not once since my accident. Samuel began swaying lightly to the music, and I did the same. For a moment, I was sure my legs would slip away, but Samuel tightened his hold around my waist.

We swayed to the music for a long time, my hands resting on Samuel’s strong shoulders. Samuel held my waist. From the outside, it probably looked as if he was simply touching me, but his hands were the reason I could stay upright for so long. My fingers clutched his shoulders, and his hands supported me. He carried most of my weight as we danced. I didn’t mind that we couldn’t do a waltz. This back-and-forth swaying was more than I’d dared to hope for, and it filled my heart with so much joy and gratefulness that I had trouble keeping the grin off my face despite the strain I felt in my legs.

I peered up and gave Samuel another grateful smile. His expression, as usual, was emotionless, controlled, and on the verge of brooding.

“Am I getting too heavy?” I asked with a hint of worry. I was much smaller than Samuel, and he looked and felt really strong, but I imagined it wasn’t easy to dance with so much additional weight.

He gave me a small smile. “I can handle it. Don’t worry about me.”

My eyebrows rose, and my expression became teasing. “So you’re saying I’m heavy.” I flushed, surprised by my own courage.

“I didn’t, and I won’t. I learned a lesson or two about the traps men can walk into in a marriage by watching my parents. To some questions, there are only wrong answers.”

The song ended, and Danilo took over from Samuel before I could say anything. I had to admit I missed being in Samuel’s arms, even if his touch was still foreign. After the dance with my brother, he brought me back to my wheelchair. I wished I could keep dancing. It always made me happy. Maybe one day I would dance as a hobby again.

Samuel appeared at the table, dropping his sister Sofia off. She and Danilo took off for another dance, and I watched them with longing.

Samuel cleared his throat, drawing my gaze up to his face.

He held out his hand. “Would you give me the honor of another dance?”

I bit my lip, nervously glancing around as I felt the gazes of the people at the surrounding tables on us. One dance had been expected, but this definitely caught the attention of several people.

I put my hand in Samuel’s, then whispered, “I’d like to dance in my wheelchair.”

Samuel nodded slowly, but I could see the questions in his expression. I too wasn’t sure how slow dancing with someone would work. He led me toward the dance floor. We stayed at the edge so I wouldn’t roll over any feet. I had never tried a waltz since my accident. Samuel’s cool and resolute expression gave me confidence, so I extended my arms so he could clasp my hands. “Let me know if I do it wrong.”

I gave him a nervous smile. “I wouldn’t know. It’s the first time I’ve done a waltz like this.”

He nodded again, appearing even more determined. He pushed me back, then pulled me closer again, back and forth, back and forth, until I felt confident to release one of his hands and do a twirl. I giggled when I managed to avoid rolling over his feet. I had to pay for my overconfidence a moment later—or, rather, Samuel had to pay for it—as I rolled over his toes during another twirl.

“I’m sorry!” I exclaimed at the brief flash of discomfort on his face.

“I’m used to living on the edge,” he said in such a humorless tone that I couldn’t stop a flood of giggles from bursting out.

Samuel’s mouth briefly twitched into a smile, and my worries over how this day would go evaporated.

Our eyes met. “Thank you.”

“What for?” I asked. Emma looked at me as if I’d given her a great gift. I hope she wasn’t thanking me for marrying her because she’d soon realize I wasn’t the fucking catch everyone made me out to be.

“For dancing with me like this,” she said with a small laugh as if it should have been obvious. Her eyes sparkled with happiness, and all I could think about was how she could still be such a positive person after all the shit that’d been thrown at her. Hearing her carefree giggles had given me a burst of positivity I hadn’t felt in forever.

“You’re my wife. You deserve as many wedding dances as you desire.”

For all the shit you’ll have to put up with while being married to me.

The song drew to an end, but I didn’t stop moving back and forth with Emma, and when the next song began, she tried another twirl.

When she didn’t roll over my feet this time, she looked immensely pleased with herself. “How are your toes?”

I gave her a small smile. “Don’t worry about me. That was nothing. I can tolerate a lot of pain, and this is far less painful than the social chitchat

at these gatherings."

Her eyebrows rose, and her expression became teasing. "So you prefer me rolling over your feet to talking to me?" She flushed. I'd always only seen Emma's quiet and shy side, so I too was surprised, not unpleasantly though. If she wasn't quite as breakable, that would make things easier for me. Today, her personality had shone through several times.

"I don't. Talking to you has been surprisingly pleasant so far."

"Do you say it because you learned that lesson from watching your parents' marriage or because it's true?"

"It's true, but said lessons definitely play a part too."

She giggled, then bit her lip, looking away. After a moment, she cast her gaze back up, watching me through her long lashes. "I can't wait to see what lessons you learned."

A dirty joke lay on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it at the last moment. For some reason, I was unsure how to handle Emma when it came to the bedroom. We'd never breached the subject of sex for multiple reasons. It had felt inappropriate for a long time due to her age. She was eight years younger, dammit. Plus, we rarely talked alone. And for some reason, it felt as if I was taking advantage of her. Her disability made her seem so vulnerable that making advances on her felt like I was using her.

"Why are you frowning?" she asked, worry filling her beautiful face.

"It's nothing," I clipped.

"Of course." She became tense, and I wanted to kick myself. I'd have to figure this shit out by tonight. Maybe it would be best if I just talked to her, even if it embarrassed her. I could hardly talk to Danilo about this even though he was the one who knew her best. The thought of his enraged face if I did talk about the wedding night cheered me up considerably.

"Let's enjoy another dance," I suggested, and her hand relaxed in mine once again. After that dance, Danilo took over again, giving me another hard look. He should know that I was immune to it by now.

Despite my desire to return to the table for a glass of wine, it was my turn to dance with my mother next.

Her eyes were glassy when she took Emma's place. She hadn't always been this emotional in public, and she was still mostly a very controlled woman, but since losing my twin sister, she seemed to savor every moment she got to celebrate with Sofia and me all the more.

She gave me a half-embarrassed smile. “You two look really sweet together. I hope the photographer took many photos of you.”

“I’m sure she did. You’ll have plenty of images to fawn over.”

Mom gave me a reproachful look. I gave her the smile that always appeased her. She squeezed my shoulder. “Are you happy?”

“This marriage was never meant to make me happy. It was a business deal,” I said.

Mom briefly looked at where Sofia stood talking to Anna and Luisa. Sofia definitely didn’t look happy about her marriage to Danilo, which was another thing that had dampened my mood in the past few days. “I know, but I want you to be happy. I want you to at least try to be happy and not forbid yourself from it because of a past mistake.”

“A mistake doesn’t kill three of your friends. But I’ll try to be happy, Mom.”

Mom’s eyes drifted to Emma who still swayed to the music with Danilo. “She deserves happiness too.”

“Playing the guilt card?” I asked with a hint of amusement. Mom didn’t use it very often, but when she did, she was good at it.

“If it ensures you finally stop living in the past and be the boy I raised.”

“I’m still him, just older and more jaded. That boy wouldn’t survive long as an Underboss.”

She hit my shoulder. I kissed her cheek. “Time to switch partners.”

I handed her over to Dante and started dancing with Valentina. With her heels, she was almost my height, which was an impressive feat.

“You look relieved to be dancing with me.”

I smirked. “Sometimes mothers can get a bit overbearing.”

“Well, I’m one myself, so yes. Don’t be angry with her. For a mother seeing a child suffer is the worst thing possible.”

“Do I look like I suffer?” I asked sarcastically. The last thing I needed was to appear weak in public.

“No, you are as controlled as Dante where your emotions are concerned.”

I didn’t comment on that. Dante was my Capo, that he was also my uncle was completely irrelevant, so I definitely wouldn’t judge his emotional state. As his wife, Valentina could say whatever she wanted.

Luckily, Valentina didn’t try to talk about feelings after that. Eventually, I could escape the dance floor. Emma was in conversation with Sofia, Anna, and a red-headed girl I didn’t know at our table, so I went over to the bar to grab a drink. Danilo joined me soon after, ordering a drink for himself. “I appreciate that you gave Emma the dance she deserves.”

I nodded, sensing that this wasn’t all he had to say.

“About tonight—”

I cut him off before he could piss me off. His bringing up the subject of our wedding night was definitely nothing I would tolerate, even if I’d previously entertained the thought. “Listen, if this is about what happens behind closed doors tonight, then keep it to yourself. Emma is my wife, and she and I can figure things out without your involvement. Or do you want to discuss why Sofia looks like she swallowed a bitter pill?”

Danilo narrowed his eyes, but then he nodded. He obviously wasn’t very keen on having someone shove their nose in his marriage either. Mom had told me that Sofia had assured her that Danilo treated her right. She probably wished for a loving marriage like most women did. *Like Emma did.*

Renato joined us, carrying two glasses filled generously with red wine. “Negroamaro,” he said as he handed one glass to me.

Danilo raised an eyebrow. “You can refill your glasses. You don’t need to fill them to the brim.”

Renato took a hefty gulp from his wine, emptying it by half. “Thanks for the tip.”

I took a few gulps from my wine as well. The effects of the spirit in my flask had already faded, and I hadn’t found time to get it out again yet. “That busty redhead makes me dream about a tit job,” Renato muttered, his eyes on the curvy girl talking to Emma, Anna, and Sofia.

I sent him a look that said *shut up*.

Danilo scowled. “That is Emma’s best friend Giorgia.”

“She promised?” Renato asked.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Danilo drawled.

I emptied my glass. “I don’t think telling her you want a tit fuck is going to make her swoon.”

“If you married her, Emma would have her best friend in Minneapolis. That would be a good thing,” Danilo said.

I shook my head. “Always the matchmaker.”

Danilo sent me a warning look. “This isn’t something we should discuss here.” He was worried Emma would find out about our deal. I wasn’t too keen on having the info spread either.

“What isn’t?” Emma asked suddenly. She was a couple of arm’s lengths away from us, and Giorgia was with her.

Emma glanced curiously between Danilo and me.

“Business,” Danilo said with a tight smile. He went over to Emma and squeezed her shoulder before he took off toward my sister Sofia, who looked less than enthused about his approach.

“I’d like to introduce my best friend Giorgia Farina.”

I dipped my head in greeting, trying not to stare at her low neckline. If Renato hadn’t spewed the nonsense about the tit fuck, that wouldn’t have been a problem. “Nice to meet you. You’re always welcome to visit Minneapolis. My family and I will make sure you’re safe.”

Giorgia smiled brightly, but the smile dulled when she noticed Renato’s less-than-proper leer. He was practically glued to her chest. I nudged his side. “Please meet my friend Renato.” He tore his gaze up to nod at Emma before he smiled his most charming smile at Giorgia. I hoped he didn’t think he could ruin my wedding by making advances on this girl.

“Pleasure,” he said in a way that made me want to kick his stupid ass.

Giorgia made a face as if she got a whiff of something nasty.

Emma blinked, then gave me an uncertain look. “Uh, nice to meet you, Renato.” She met Giorgia’s gaze, and something passed between them that I had no clue about.

“We should head back to Anna and Sofia,” Emma said and gave me a questioning look.

“So much for making a good first impression,” I muttered.

“Giorgia liked what she saw.”

“I’m talking about Emma. You’re my best friend. It would be nice if my wife didn’t hate you.”

Renato scoffed. “She’s your wife. She has to accept whoever you’re friends with, Samuel. You make the rules.”

“I need another drink.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. Come on. I have a bottle of bourbon in my jacket.”

After a couple of shots of bourbon, I felt much more relaxed. I knew I couldn't get drunk at my wedding, but it took a lot of alcohol for me to show actual signs of intoxication.

I was glad for my ability to hold my liquor when Dante, Valentina, and my parents joined me after Renato and I had almost emptied the bottle. Renato quickly excused himself, as he definitely showed signs of having drunk too much.

"Where's your lovely wife?" Valentina asked with a smile. Dante had a hand on her lower back and regarded her with obvious appreciation. My father had an arm around Mom's waist. Despite their arranged marriages, both couples obviously loved each other, but I wasn't foolish enough to believe that happened with most pairings. They were lucky. Considering fate's way of screwing me over in the past, I doubted luck would be on my side with my marriage to Emma. I searched the room until I found Emma in conversation with Giorgia near the bar. She was drinking a glass of white wine. "She's busy with her friend."

"Maybe you should go over to her now," Mom suggested.

"Ines," Dad said in a low voice. "I'm sure Emma and Samuel can handle their marriage."

Dante exchanged a mildly amused look with me. I felt half tempted to ask him how he had built a solid marriage with Valentina, considering he was as emotionally withdrawn as me.

"She's on her own now," Mom said.

My gaze locked on Emma, who was moving toward the doors and went out of the room unaccompanied. I considered following her, but I didn't want her to feel watched. She could handle herself. I didn't want her to think I considered her not capable. "She's probably heading to the bathroom. I doubt she wants my company there."

Mom sent me a reproachful look, but I was immune to it by now.

When Emma hadn't returned fifteen minutes later, I got a bad feeling. I kept glancing at the doors.

"Why don't you go to your wife? Dante and I will chat some more with your parents," Valentina said with a knowing smile.

Dante gave a curt nod. "Tonight is only about you and your wife."

I gave them a tight smile and headed for the doors. I couldn't explain it, but I just felt particularly protective of Emma. Maybe it was because she

seemed more vulnerable in her wheelchair. Any kind of weakness always drew in the worst characters of our world, and plenty of horrid people were at this gathering today.

I followed my instinct and went toward the restrooms in the adjoining hallway. The moment I turned the corner, I spotted Emma, and she wasn't alone.

One of the guests, a distant relative whose name I'd never bothered to keep in my mind, stood in front of her. His wide stance and the way he bent over with his hand pressed against the wall right over Emma's head pissed me off right away. My pulse began pounding.

"Maybe you need help…" he said, and I hesitated, wondering if I let my irrational overprotectiveness get the better of me, but he leaned farther down as if he was about to lift her despite Emma shaking her head.

What the fuck? He was definitely not being helpful. The asshole was making a move on her, on my wife. I got a glimpse of Emma's face. Her face turned red, and she looked uncomfortable.

I stalked toward them, now absolutely furious. He straightened a second before I reached him, but I didn't give him time to turn. I grabbed his throat, my fingers digging in and squeezing. I punched him in his kidney with my free hand. He sank on one knee and stared up at me with watering eyes. I didn't loosen my hold on his throat. "You owe my wife an apology."

Emma's wide eyes darted from me to him. She held his gaze.

I released him so he could speak. "I'm sorry," he got out, sounding only distantly honest, but Emma nodded and gave me an encouraging look.

I met his gaze. "I think it's time for you to go home now. The party's over for you."

He didn't need to be told twice. He hurried away, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe what had happened. I gritted my teeth against a new wave of anger and tried to stop myself from chasing him down and killing him. If Emma hadn't been there and if this wasn't our wedding, I definitely wouldn't have reacted as restrained. Maybe I would request his presence at some point and fake an accident.

I stepped closer to Emma. She was smoothing out her beautiful dress, her cheeks still flushed. She looked as if she wanted to disappear.

"Do people often disrespect you?" I asked in a moderately calm voice.

Emma shrugged, peering up at me through her long lashes. She looked gorgeous with her big doe-like eyes. “It happens on occasion. Some men seem to think I’m easy prey because of the wheelchair.” Some of her embarrassment was replaced by fierce frustration. Her brows pulled together as she regarded the ring around her finger.

“It won’t happen again,” I muttered.

Emma raised her brows curiously. “You won’t always be around. I need to learn to speak my mind instead of sitting there like a mouse in a trap.”

“Once people realize I won’t tolerate this kind of behavior, they’ll stop.” I moved closer and motioned toward the door of the accessible toilet.

She quickly shook her head. “I was on my way back to the party when he came along.”

I touched her shoulder. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

She chuckled and nodded. “Absolutely sure. Don’t worry. You came before it got really bad.”

We moved back toward the party together, and after that, I stayed close to her side. I didn’t want another idiot to ruin this day for Emma.

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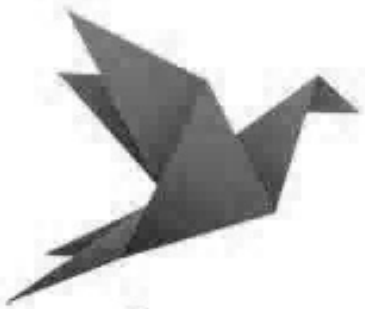
CHAPTER NINE



It was getting late, and my nerves started to show, so I spent a few more minutes with Giorgia. She was always good at distracting me.

Giorgia and I moved to a corner for a chat, shielded from view by a privacy screen because a door to the staff area hid behind it. “You look nervous.”

“I am. It’s strange knowing that I’ll spend the night with Samuel. And not just sleeping.”

Giorgia bit the corner of her lower lip. “I’m sure it’ll be good. He knows what he’s doing.”

“Yeah,” I whispered. “But it’s not like he chose to marry me.”

“You look friggin’ hot. He’ll be into you unless he’s gay.”

I giggled. “I’m pretty sure he’s not.”

A few minutes after midnight, Samuel and I took our leave and headed toward Samuel's black Mercedes limousine. Our families and a few others followed us to see us off.

Samuel opened the passenger door for me, then his brows pulled together. I usually had no trouble lifting myself into a car seat, but the long dress made it a tad more difficult.

"I can lift her into the car." Danilo stepped forward.

"No, I can handle it," Samuel said at once. He bent down and slid one arm behind my back and the other under my legs. I quickly slung my arm around his neck, and my hand came to rest against his chest. His sudden closeness drove heat into my cheeks. He lifted me out of the wheelchair, and I clung to him, acutely aware of the crowd watching us.

"You won't always have to lift me into the car."

Samuel set me down on the leather seat. "It's our wedding day. It's tradition to carry the bride over the threshold, so I might as well carry you into the car."

I grinned, relieved by his casual words. They lifted a weight off my shoulders.

"Thank you," I said as I buckled up.

Danilo watched me with his usual look of vigilant concern. I rolled my eyes at him before Samuel closed the door, and the privacy glass prevented the outside world from seeing my face.

Samuel slid behind the steering wheel and started the car. When we pulled away from the hotel, I could feel a sense of wistfulness. One part of my life was over, and a new chapter had begun. I was looking forward to it with trepidation and excitement. I wasn't sure what to expect from a marriage with Samuel.

We pulled up in front of a beautiful mansion, which sat right at the lakefront. It was a newly built, two-story mansion on Lake of the Isles. Ramps had been built beside the two stairs that led up the slope to the front door. Floor-to-ceiling windows dominated the front on the first and second floors to give a view of the lake. Samuel pushed me up the ramp, then he opened the door for me.

"Would you like a tour?" Samuel asked as I looked around the entrance hall with its high ceiling. I had seen the exposé and a few photos Samuel had taken, but seeing it in person was an entirely different experience.

I couldn’t wait to see the outdoor pool in the backyard and the fireplace on the deck. All day, I’d been nervous about tonight, so I knew I wouldn’t be able to focus on anything else. “Maybe tomorrow morning, but now I’d rather go to bed.” My cheeks exploded with heat, but Samuel simply nodded. He looked calm and not at all nervous. I wished I could have a bit of his calm.

Next to the staircase, a modern glass elevator had been installed. Samuel pressed the button, and the doors slid open. He motioned for me to go in first and followed me. He stood very close to me as the elevator did not allow for much space between us. Not that I minded. Still, it was strange to be almost at eye level with his groin area, considering what would happen soon. My cheeks warmed further, and I tried to get my mind out of the gutter before I turned red like a tomato.

The elevator stopped on the upper floor and slid open. Samuel exited so I had room to wheel out. I glanced around. The gallery allowed a nice view over the entryway and onto the lake. Even in the dark, I could tell the view was spectacular. This could become a true home.

I glanced up at Samuel, who waited patiently beside me to look out the window. I hoped the two of us could make this a home.

He gave me a small smile, but it was so hard to read his eyes. He seemed so controlled, almost disinterested. Didn’t our wedding night make him nervous at all?

I gave him a smile in turn and glanced past him to indicate that we could move on.

“The primary bedroom is over there,” he said, leading me toward the first door on the left. He opened the door for me, and I moved inside. The walls were painted dark blue, and a beautiful light gray herringbone parquet covered the floor. A chandelier hung over the wide king-sized bed with its silver bedding. The soft light from the chandelier immediately relaxed me.

After finishing my first quick assessment, I stopped in the middle, unsure what to do and where to go. To the bathroom? But the dress was closed by dozens of tiny buttons I wouldn’t even be capable of opening myself. Samuel closed the door before he faced me.

He looked magnificent in his dark blue tuxedo. He had blond hair and stunning blue eyes, with wide shoulders and strong arms. I tore my gaze away and lowered it to my hands, which fumbled with my purse.

Silence cloaked us like a heavy drape, settling itself like a suffocating weight on my heart until my throat tightened and embarrassment crowded my chest. I should let him off easily and tell him I was tired.

I didn't want him to sleep with me because he felt obligated when he didn't desire me. "Is it okay if I go to the bathroom to wash my face and freshen up?"

"Of course," Samuel said, and the tight note in his voice made me look up. His brows were drawn together as he regarded me, maybe wondering if he needed to help me. With that intense look, he seemed even less approachable, like there was no way I could ever crash through the walls he had built as a high-ranking Made Man. The thought that he might worry about having to assist me to go to the toilet drove shame into my cheeks.

I rolled my wheelchair into the bathroom but didn't close the door and continued until I was in front of the sink. The bathroom was incredibly spacious, so I had more than enough room to move around. The shower was accessible with a wide door that allowed easy access and handles so I could pull myself up, and one of the counters was lower so I could easily see my reflection even when seated in my wheelchair.

Samuel followed me and leaned against the doorframe. His scrutiny made me nervous, but at the same time, I wanted to show him that I wasn't as helpless as he worried. I arrested the brakes of my wheelchair, then slid my legs to the floor and carefully pushed myself to my feet. Samuel rocked forward as if he thought I would fall, but I gripped the edge of the counter to steady myself and straightened. His eyes trailed along my body, and I realized he was checking me out in my wedding dress. I couldn't read his expression, but I hoped he liked what he saw. I loved the dress, loved how I looked in it. I went through my evening routine, cleaning my face and brushing my teeth, while Samuel stood in the doorway.

I wished he'd at least say something. When I was done, I paused and peered toward my husband in the mirror. Our gazes locked, and the intensity in his halted my breath. I swallowed, not sure what to do. At that moment, it seemed impossible that only eight years separated us. *Eight years and a lifetime of experiences.*

Undressing would be next, but I'd need his help with the dress, and considering this was our wedding night, he should be eager to get me out of

my clothes and into the bed. Samuel briefly looked away, and when he met my gaze again, his expression was stone.

I swallowed my disappointment and my pride. “I need help with the buttons.”

“Of course.” Samuel walked over to me, and my fingers on the counter tightened. My legs grew tired from standing. My muscles were not strong enough to carry my weight this long after a day like this.

“Do you need to sit down?” Samuel asked as he towered over me. He was much broader and taller than me, and my insides liquefied at his strength.

“Yes,” I said quietly. “But then you won’t be able to reach the buttons.”

Samuel considered me for a few seconds. “If you lie down on your stomach on the bed, I can unbutton your dress.”

My stomach fluttered. “That sounds like a good plan.”

A small, tense smile graced Samuel’s face, and he surprised me when he lifted me and carried me over to the bed. I wasn’t sure where to put my hands, suddenly overwhelmed with the situation, so I cradled them against my stomach. When we reached the bed, he paused, and I looked up. My belly twisted at the look on his face. I wasn’t sure what it meant, but my pulse sped up nevertheless. He tore his gaze away and put me down. As I lay before him in my dress and he stood over me, my nerves bustled in my body. I rolled over, presenting my back to him, and he perched on the edge of the bed. His fingers brushed the skin between my shoulder blades when he reached for the top buttons of the dress, and I stifled a soft sigh as I rested my head on my forearms.

Samuel worked on my buttons in silence, and every so often, his fingers brushed my skin as he loosened the buttons. I could feel his accidental touches in the deepest pit of my belly, wakening something I had never felt before. When he reached the last third, I stilled. Those buttons were positioned right over my ass, and my heart sped up when I realized that Samuel would soon see me like no one had ever seen me, half naked with only tiny lace panties. He kept opening my dress, but his fingers lingered often now, soft against my skin.

“Done,” he said with a slightly rougher quality to his voice that I couldn’t place.

I lifted my head a few inches and peered over my shoulder at him. “Thank you.”

Samuel dragged his eyes up from where his hands still rested on my backside, half on the fabric of my dress, half against my skin. He gave a tense nod. For a moment, neither of us said anything, and my confusion rose because his expression was one I’d never seen on his or any man’s face before.

“Why don’t you turn on your back? Then I can help you out of your dress.”

My breath stilled in my throat. I could have pulled the dress down myself at this point, but I nodded and rolled over on my back. Samuel’s eyes slid along my body before he stood and bent over me, grabbing the straps of my dress. My breathing quickened with nerves. Samuel gazed into my eyes, noticing of course, and he didn’t look away when he slid the straps down my arms. He halted briefly before hooking his fingers under my neckline and slowly pushing the dress down.

Surprise followed by something darker flashed in his eyes when he saw that I wasn’t wearing a bra. The dress didn’t allow for one.

My nipples puckered, and goose bumps covered my body. I resisted the urge to cover myself and lay still under Samuel’s steady gaze. I wasn’t self-conscious about this part of my body, and his lingering attention filled me with a strange warmth. He pushed the dress farther down along my legs until I lay before him in nothing but my panties. His eyes traced my legs. They didn’t look different from other people’s legs, a little less in control and less muscled, but nothing was obvious when I lay like this. They filled me with insecurity anyway.

He pulled his eyes away from my body, and disappointment filled me. I’d tried to keep my expectations low so as not to be disappointed, but I’d still secretly hoped for a real wedding night.

“We should talk,” Samuel murmured.

I nodded, swallowing hard, barely able to look him in the eye. I knew what was coming. He’d now explain to me that he couldn’t be with me because he just wasn’t attracted to me. I had expected something like that. Ours wouldn’t be the first fake marriage.

I reached for my nightgown. “I can—” I was about to tell him that I could dress myself in my nightgown before we had this talk, as my

nakedness didn’t serve any other purpose than to make me feel even more vulnerable. Samuel stopped my hand with a gentle touch.

I frowned at him, confused and acutely aware of his dressed state and how close to my mostly naked body he was. “You don’t have to justify yourself,” I whispered. “Don’t give me any long-winded explanations.”

Samuel narrowed his eyes in contemplation. “I’m not sure what you’re saying.”

I swallowed, feeling almost sick from embarrassment and hurt. Did I really have to spell it out for him? “I don’t expect you to consummate our marriage if you’re not attracted to me. I realize men can’t just fake being attracted to someone.” I crossed my arms over my breasts, wishing I could walk and make a quick escape.

Samuel leaned back slightly, his brows climbing his forehead. He shook his head, looking as if I’d lost my mind. “You think this talk is about me not wanting to have sex with you?”

I blinked. His half-amused, half-aghast tone threw me completely off.

“Trust me, that’s not the case, and I won’t have to fake being attracted to you.”

“Okay,” I said hesitantly. “Then what did you want to talk about?”

He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes trailing over my panties, my exposed stomach, and my hands still clutching my breasts. “I wanted to make sure I’m not taking advantage of you.”

Now it was my turn to be completely taken aback until it dawned on me what he meant. “Because I’m in a wheelchair, you worry wanting to sleep with me is taking advantage of me?”

“Maybe.” He paused, his frown deepening. “And I don’t want to hurt you. You are more vulnerable than other women, so it crossed my mind that I might have to be more careful because of your injuries.”

I bit my lip. Maybe the mostly faded scars on my back, hips, and legs had caused him to worry, and I found it incredibly touching that he was trying to make sure that I would be okay. “You don’t have to treat me differently. I’m not breakable, and my injuries were treated properly, so they don’t cause me much trouble anymore. I’m not any different from other women. The wheelchair doesn’t mean I feel differently or that I don’t feel desire. I’m your wife, a woman, a person. The wheelchair doesn’t define who I am.”

“All right,” Samuel said in a low voice, moving a bit closer. “Then I’ll cut to the chase. I want to have sex with my wife tonight. What about you?”

Boom. I stared at him. I knew he meant me, but it took a few heartbeats to sink in. My throat became inexplicably dry. I’d fantasized about it, but I hadn’t really thought it would happen. Now that I realized it would really happen, my nerves crashed down on me. “I-I…”

“It’s okay if you say no.”

“No,” I blurted. “I mean, yes.” I shook my head, feeling a bit lightheaded.

Samuel touched my neck lightly, a gesture that calmed and excited me at the same time.

“I-I want to.”

“Don’t think. Let me handle it,” Samuel murmured, sounding reassuringly confident.

The overthinker in me protested, but for once, I didn’t listen. I only nodded. Samuel oozed control and calm.

Samuel removed his jacket with utter poise, then unfastened his gun holster and put it down on the nightstand. He climbed on the bed, and suddenly, he leaned over me, his face taking up my vision, and his mouth came down on mine, kissing me. Kissing me like he meant it, not hesitant and restrained, but firm and demanding, and before I could process what was happening, his tongue found mine and tasted me, teased me, filled me with a fire I had been unfamiliar with. He climbed on top of me, his weight pressing me into the mattress, surrounding me with his warmth and scent and strength.

Flames of need licked at my belly, making me ache in a way I’d never experienced. When he finally pulled back, his breathing harsh, his eyes dark and full of desire, I felt like he’d breathed life into me. He looked at me like I was the most desirable woman on this planet.

His hand brushed my shoulder before moving to my rib cage and my hands, which were still pressed against my breasts. He looked me in the eyes as he pulled one hand, then the other away, laying me bare.

I swallowed, my breath shaky.

“You can say no any time,” he rasped. I didn’t say anything. I didn’t think I could get a word out of my tight throat. I was so nervous and excited like never before.

His gaze slid lower, down to my puckered nipples, then his thumb stroked the underside of my breast. The touch was light and gentle as his fingers traced the curve of my breasts almost reverently. He lifted his head, and his blue eyes searched mine. Did he think I'd stop him?

Even if I was nervous, even if I wasn't sure I was ready for what he wanted, I was too high on the look of hunger on his face to leave it unfulfilled.

I stared back at him, my tongue too heavy to speak the actual words—to tell him I wanted this, I wanted him—but he must have seen it in my face, probably from years of experience with countless women. His palm covered my breast, and his mouth claimed mine once more.

His fingers teased my nipple, rubbing it between them, sending a delicious tingling through my core, which intensified with every swirl of Samuel's tongue in my mouth. I lay motionless, not because my body forced me but because Samuel rendered me as such.

He didn't leave me time for doubt or fear as he pulled away from my mouth and latched onto my nipple.

I let out a surprised gasp at the feel of his hot, wet tongue pressing against my nipple, circling it, of his teeth grazing my sensitive skin. My fingers found the back of his head, holding on to him almost desperately as I gasped and trembled, completely overwhelmed. The feel of his crisp suit against my bare arms and belly was strangely erotic. He moved from one breast to the next before he made his way down my body, nibbling and kissing, but when he reached my hip bone, I tensed, worried he'd touch my legs, legs that weren't as sensitive as that of others.

Samuel peered up at me as he caressed from my calf up to my thigh. I distantly felt the touch in some places, mostly my thighs, like a dull pressure, but it wasn't strong, and in other places, I didn't feel anything at all.

I considered faking sensations, but again, Samuel acted before I could. His touch became firmer as he kneaded my upper thighs, and finally, I felt it everywhere, especially deep in my core, as if my head had finally caught up. He lowered his head and pressed a kiss to my thigh as his eyes regarded my face, gauging my reaction. I saw the kiss more than I felt it, but by seeing it, seeing Samuel's beautiful face against my thigh, my body reacted with a flood of desire. He bit down lightly on my skin, and I felt that in my

core like a shock wave of arousal. My eyes widened, stunned and helpless in his hands.

His fingers hooked in my panties, and he pulled them down. Heat filled my cheeks from the intense look in his eyes as he raised them from my center to my face. Never taking his gaze off me, he gripped my upper thigh and parted me. I should have looked away, but I couldn't bring myself to. I wanted to watch the hunger in Samuel's eyes as he looked at me. He dragged his thumb along my crease, and I sucked in a startled breath, too caught up in the sensation to be embarrassed because my body didn't react as easily.

He rubbed my folds very lightly, then pushed between them. I could feel that I was only slightly wet and worried that he'd be frustrated with my lack of reaction, but Samuel dipped the pad of his thumb into me, causing me to gasp again. He began to draw out my arousal and spread it on my folds and clit, dip and swirl, dip and swirl, over and over again until I was panting and ready, even without lubricant. He pushed his thumb into me once more, but this time, he didn't pull it back out. Instead, he started circling while his two fingers stroked my clit. I stared at his strong hand, at the fingers giving me pleasure. I could feel every movement as if he was tugging at my nerve endings like a puppet master.

It was indescribable, and I clung to the blankets, panting, gasping, losing control of my body and the sounds coming from my mouth.

"Good," he encouraged in a low voice. "You're doing very good, Emma."

His praise sent a new flood of arousal through me. He pulled out his thumb and brushed two fingers over my opening. I tensed, waiting for the discomfort, but Samuel held my gaze as he began rubbing my clit with his thumb, making me pant once more before he began to ease his fingers into me. My brows snatched together at the stretching sensation. It wasn't painful, but definitely uncomfortable.

"Remember, you can say stop anytime," he reminded me again.

"I know," I pressed out, slightly annoyed because I didn't want him to treat me like a porcelain doll.

"You're only eighteen, Emma. You're very inexperienced, so I treat you how a good husband should treat his young virgin bride, but trust me, no part of me wants to stop."

His words made me flush, but then he pushed his fingers deeper into me and pressed harder against my clit, and any sane thought left my mind. Silence settled over us except for my pants and moans and Samuel's deep breathing. I could feel my control slipping more and more as my pleasure mounted.

I bit my lip, and tension shot through my belly as waves of pleasure radiated from my center all through my body. Samuel looked up, his intense gaze focusing on my face. In the throes of my orgasm, I was unable to look away, to do anything but allow my body to run the show and ride the waves of pleasure. Samuel watched me the entire time, only briefly averting his gaze to watch his fingers on me, *in me*. He still moved them, but slower, his thumb only lightly circling my sensitive clit. I was lost in the sensations, amazed at my body, at his ability to allow me this.

His fingers kept up their teasing, allowing me to relish the pleasurable aftermath of my release. Then he pushed off me, straightening to his full impressive height, and started undressing. My eyes followed his progress, terrified and excited, as he shed one piece of clothing after the other until he stood before me completely naked. I exhaled when I caught sight of his erection, exhilarated that I had done this to him, but at the same time scared of having him in me. He was so much bigger than two fingers, which had already been uncomfortable.

Sleeping with someone, with him, had always been such an abstract concept. For a long time, I hadn't thought it would happen to me at all. I'd never felt more woman than I did at this moment, strangely empowered by my body's reaction.

Samuel climbed back on the bed. "Is this what you want?"

What I wanted? My body wanted every part of Samuel and had never felt a desire more potent. My head wanted love and affection, wanted the fantasy version of how a first time was supposed to be. I wasn't a dreamer.

"Yes," I breathed out, half tempted to ask him the same question. He gave a curt nod before he pushed my legs apart so he could settle between them. His actions were very effective, considerate, and kind, but they weren't affectionate. I shut my head down, knowing full well these thoughts weren't going to help. He lowered himself to his elbows. My breaths came faster, and my heart thundered in my chest when I felt a light pressure. This was it.

Samuel held my gaze and brushed his lips across mine in a surprising act of gentleness before he started to push in. I clung to his back and gasped against his mouth from pain this time. I forced myself to relax. Fighting the pain would only make it worse. I knew all about pain, and this was nothing in comparison. His expression became strained as he entered me slowly, then paused when he was inside me. I shivered, trying to get used to the intense stretching sensation.

Samuel looked at my face, then did the first light thrust. I winced, my breath hitching. He kept moving very slowly, his eyes on me.

Maybe I should have been embarrassed by his continuous gaze, but he was so calm and confident that it helped with my own nerves.

His thrusts soon became harder, faster, and the twinge turned into a throbbing pain, but I kissed him and held back the whimpers because I'd waited for this moment. Maybe I was still trying to prove everyone who thought I couldn't lead a normal life wrong.

He came with a groan and shudder, and I felt him release into me, felt his twitch and his muscles softening. For a moment, he remained in me, on me, but then he rolled off, his chest heaving.

I turned my head toward him, my breath coming in short, stunned exhales as the reality of what just happened set in. He'd claimed me and had enjoyed it from the look of it. I could have laughed and cried from joy despite the throbbing between my thighs. I wanted to scream at the people who'd thought this marriage would never come to be.

Samuel closed his eyes with a sigh, and I allowed myself to trace his body with my eyes—his wide chest, his ripped stomach, narrow waist, and the trimmed dark blond hair around his half-erect cock. His thighs and erection were smeared with my blood, causing me to flush.

I wanted to touch him with a despaired longing I was entirely unfamiliar with, but he didn't feel like mine to touch yet. I was his, by law, by tradition, and because he'd claimed me as such, but he didn't feel like mine. I wondered if he ever would.

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CHAPTER TEN

Pleasure hummed dully in my body. When I'd caught my breath, I sat up. I needed to clean up. The proof of Emma's innocence stained my legs and the sheets. I could feel her eyes on me. When I met her gaze, she flushed and smiled shyly. "Are you okay?" I asked, my voice still rough with lust.

Emma hadn't been very vocal about her pain, but looking at my cock and her thighs, I couldn't imagine she hadn't been in pain. Maybe I should have been more careful, but a primal part had taken control, spurred on by the knowledge that I was the first to claim her.

She gave a small nod.

She was a beautiful girl, a beautiful *woman*, now my wife. I wished fate hadn't shackled her to me. So much darkness lay in her past, and I carried too much darkness for it not to stain her future.

She reminded me of a deer in the headlights as she lay beside me, still gloriously naked, her skin flushed from what we'd done. She was gorgeous, and my desire had run the show the moment I'd seen her half-naked body. "Do you need anything?"

She sat up with a wince, her eyes taking in her smeared thighs. “I need to wash myself.”

“I’m going to take a shower. I can take you with me.”

Surprise crossed her face. She gave a small nod and smiled gratefully. Then her expression changed. “I can shower by myself.”

“I know. But we might as well do it together.”

I stood and picked her up. To my surprise, my body was already asking for more. But I ignored its call and carried Emma into the bathroom, then stepped into the shower with her. I tried to turn on the water but needed my hands to hold her up.

“Let me,” she said and turned the shower on. The first spray of water was ice cold, as it always took a few seconds to warm up. I had spent only a couple of nights in the place to look for possible improvements before we moved in together, but that was one thing I’d learned quickly. Emma sucked in a sharp breath, her fingers clamping around my bicep as her wide eyes met mine. I chuckled at her shock. She relaxed when the water finally turned warm and pursed her lips.

“You could have warned me,” she said with a small, coy smile.

“Who would have thought that a bit of cold water would make you scream louder than sex with me.”

Her lips fell open. I hadn’t intended to show my true personality to Emma so shortly after our wedding, but keeping up a front in private was hard work, and I was exhausted from all the fake pleasantries of the day.

I could tell that she misunderstood my comment from the shock and worry in her eyes. I smirked and bent closer. “I didn’t mean from pain, Emma. I’m not into that. Nothing is better than a scream in pleasure.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks became an even darker shade of red. I angled our bodies so the water reached her thighs and could wash away the blood there.

“You can set me down. That way, I can clean up.”

I slowly put her down but kept a steadying hand on her waist. She held my arm as she began to lather herself with my shower gel, an herby scent that helped me wake up in the morning. She hissed when she washed herself between her legs.

“What is this?” she asked with a curious look up at me.

I grimaced. “This gives you a fresh kick.”

She quickly washed off the remaining foam and watching her fingers clean her pussy sent a flood of blood straight to my cock. She noticed my gaze and flushed a bright red. I looked away and washed my face, forcing my thoughts away from Emma's naked body.

Tomorrow, our families would have lunch together, and afterward, there'd hopefully be some time to discuss new ways to destroy the Falcone's empire. Too much time had already been wasted on wedding planning—ours and Danilo's to my sister. It was time to return our focus to business.

"Are you done?" I asked her with a sideways glance, trying to stay on track and not lose myself in her beauty again.

"Yes," she said, quieter than before. I wasn't sure what caused her sudden mood swing.

I stepped out of the shower and slung a towel around my waist before I grabbed one for Emma and wrapped it around her shoulders, tugging her in. She peered up at me, her expressive brown eyes locking on mine. This woman had so much love to give. One look at her told me that and more. She hoped what we had could turn into a loving marriage.

Emma was lovable. If I allowed it, I could see myself falling for her one day. But for that to happen, I would have to let her in. I would have to let her see the darkness of the past, the darkness I still carried with me. Could she bear the heavy guilt I carried? Most days, it was too heavy even for my shoulders. I released her shoulders, my expression closing off. "We should sleep now."

She gave me a tight smile. "I need to get ready. Give me a moment."

I left the bathroom. I put on pajama bottoms, then waited for Emma to emerge. I wasn't sure if she'd need my help or if she even wanted it. Emma was used to handling things alone. The door opened, and Emma appeared, holding the doorframe to steady herself. She wore a gold silk nightgown and had her long hair braided so it fell over her shoulder. "Can you bring me my wheelchair?"

I pushed it over to her. "I could carry you again."

"I don't want to impose on your kindness."

Emma was definitely colder than before. Maybe she realized that a bond built on mutual respect was better than hoping for love. "I'm your husband. It's my job to be kind to you."

Her face became even more closed off. I realized my choice of words had been less than clever. I rolled the wheelchair over to her. She lowered herself into her wheelchair and moved it toward the bed, then she engaged the brake and stood. She climbed into bed. I joined her. She turned to me with a stubborn gleam in her eyes. “I’m not a job. I have worked too hard for my independence to be an obligation to anyone.”

I frowned. “I never called you an obligation, and I realize my choice of words was inapt. I was referencing our wedding vows. It’s my duty as your husband to treat you well and take care of you.”

“As is my duty. This isn’t a one-way street.”

“I know. But I have a feeling you’re better at being kind and taking care of people than I am. I’m better at ruining lives.”

She pursed her lips, questions filling her eyes. Thankfully, she didn’t voice them. “We both can do our best. This is only the beginning of our marriage. We’ll have a lot of time to figure this out together.”

I woke to the sound of gentle breathing. The memories of last night filtered through my sleepy brain, and I had to stifle a smile. When I opened my eyes, the room was still mostly dark because the curtains were drawn. I blinked and turned my head toward the sound of breathing. Samuel lay with his muscled back turned to me. The blanket pooled around his hip, allowing me to take him in. Three names were tattooed on his back. It was the

position where his heart was. For a moment, I worried they were names of women he'd perhaps dated over the years, though it seemed strange to keep a list of previous lovers. Not to mention that I knew from the gossip mill that Samuel had been with more than three women. Yet he hadn't been with any of them long enough to warrant a permanent place for their name on his skin.

When I scanned the names, relief settled in me. Enea, Domenico, and Arlo must have been friends who'd died over the years. As a Made Man, death was always a close companion. Several scars covered his back, reminding me that he too had gotten close to death before. I knew he'd been captured by the Camorra when he'd tried to save his twin.

He stirred suddenly and rolled over. I tried to pretend I had been waking up too and not staring at him. His blond hair was tousled from sleep. He looked cute and not as distant as usual. I resisted the urge to touch him even though I really wanted to.

"Morning," I said with a hesitant smile. What was I supposed to talk about? Was Samuel a morning person? Or did he prefer silence because he was a grump?

"Do you need help?" Samuel asked, his voice still rough from sleep. He motioned to my wheelchair beside the bed.

I gave him a tight smile. "No, thank you. I'm fine." He thought I required constant support. I didn't want to blame him for his misconception. Many people who'd never lived with a disabled person felt they needed constant help. Some people actually did, but I could get through my daily routine with minimal support. The only thing I usually needed help with were things on the upper shelves.

He sat up.

"The names on your back, are they of dead friends?"

Samuel's face hardened, a shadow of the past flitting through his eyes. "Of friends who died because of me."

My lips parted in surprise. I could tell it was a topic Samuel didn't want to talk about. I nodded and stopped myself from asking more questions. Maybe I'd ask Danilo about them. He definitely knew the details about Samuel's past, especially his rescue mission. But Danilo, too, didn't like talking about it as it marked the year in which he'd lost his fiancée to Remo Falcone.

Maybe one day, Samuel would feel comfortable enough with me to share the full story.

“I’ll freshen up and get dressed. Will we have breakfast together?”

“Sure. I took the day off.”

I got into my wheelchair, acutely aware that Samuel watched my every move. The tension in his upper body and the keen attentiveness in his expression made it clear he was ready to leap out of bed and assist me should I require his help. It was kind of sweet but also frustrating. I didn’t want to become someone he had to care for, at least not beyond what a husband did for his wife. I smoothed out my nightgown and resolutely gripped the wheels before I moved toward the bathroom. The door was closed, and I had to angle my wheelchair to the side to push it open. Samuel climbed to his feet, obviously thinking he needed to open the door for me.

I sent him another smile before I disappeared inside the bathroom. The moment I stopped in front of the sink, Samuel appeared in the doorway. I had to stifle my laughter, though I also felt a little like screaming. Clearing my throat, I gathered my courage and said, “You don’t have to hover, you know? I’m an adult. The wheelchair doesn’t mean I can’t handle things on my own. You can treat me like you would any other woman.”

I cringed at my last words.

Samuel frowned. “You are my wife, and I want to take care of you.”

“That’s really nice, and I appreciate it, but unless I ask for help, I can do it on my own.”

Samuel nodded. Still, I wasn’t sure if it had really gotten through to him. Maybe he’d actually need to see me handle things to believe I could. Mobsters could be stubborn and overprotective. I had to admit a part of me was pleased that Samuel took our marriage serious enough to want to make good on his promise, but I also knew I’d get frustrated very quickly if he treated me like a child. I wanted to be a partner on equal footing, which was hard enough in our traditional world.

“Do you want to be alone, or can I brush my teeth?”

“You can stay.”

He came in and stopped in front of the other sink. I still wasn’t sure if he didn’t use the toothbrushing excuse to keep an eye on me. Maybe I would have been annoyed if that didn’t give me the chance to admire his breathtaking body. Yesterday, I’d been too overwhelmed by the situation to

pay much attention, but now I could really savor every inch of Samuel. He was only in low-hanging silk pajama bottoms, and I kept checking out his six-pack and the sexy V.

I was still slightly sore from yesterday, but seeing Samuel, I wouldn't have said no to a repeat performance. Our eyes met, and my cheeks heated at being caught ogling him. I couldn't help but wonder if there would be an encore. Maybe Samuel had only done his duty last night and wouldn't try to sleep with me again. Perhaps he'd pick a mistress to fulfill his bodily needs. Maybe he already had one. I wasn't naive. It wasn't uncommon for men in our world to have a mistress, especially if they were as good-looking and powerful as Samuel. I'd felt sexy last night. Samuel made me feel that way with his touch, but did that mean he would be faithful?

It would crush me if he were one of those men who cheated because they had plenty of opportunity.

I hated this train of thought and didn't even want to consider it. I wheeled out of the bathroom and grabbed a cute blush sundress for the day, plus pointy flat pumps. I was already dressed when Samuel came out.

I took the elevator to the ground floor while Samuel headed down the stairs. The breakfast table had already been set for the two of us, and pastries, fruit, and yogurt parfaits had been set up in the center.

The moment Samuel and I had taken our places across from each other at one end of the table, a woman who I assumed was the cook came in. She was tall and curvy and in her late thirties or early forties, with kind eyes and curly brown hair in a ponytail.

"Good morning. What would you like for breakfast?" She spoke with a heavy Italian accent, so she probably hadn't been in the States very long.

I glanced at the pastries and parfait. "We have a good selection," I said in Italian because I missed speaking it.

Samuel, too, seemed unsure what she meant, and he too switched to Italian. "This is Azzurra. She comes highly recommended from my parents' cook. What is for breakfast?"

I loved hearing Samuel talk in Italian. We'd mostly talked in English so far, but I decided I found his voice even sexier in Italian.

"I can prepare whatever you like. If you prefer American style, I can make egg dishes, waffles, pancakes."

I grabbed a maritozzo, a traditional Italian sweet bun filled with cream. “I personally prefer a cornetto, brioche, or maritozzo for breakfast, and of course a cappuccino.”

Azzurra gave an approving nod. I hesitated. I didn’t want to be nosy, but I was curious. “Where are you from? I’m unfamiliar with your accent.”

“I was born in a very small village in the Maremma region.”

“Why did you come here?”

“My son wanted to move here to join the Outfit. I’m a widow and only have him, so I came along. It’s been two years.”

Samuel nodded. “He’s hardworking and brave.”

Azzurra gave a proud smile. “I’ll leave you alone now. If you need anything, ring the bell.”

She turned and moved out, giving us privacy. I knew she meant well. After all, this was the morning after our wedding night, but speaking with her was so much easier than talking to Samuel.

Samuel picked up a cornetto, bit into it, then regarded me curiously. “Some people don’t care about the people who work for them.”

My lips pinched. “I want to know who’s helping out in our house. These are people with stories, and I want to get to know them.”

“I agree,” he said, then took a sip from his cappuccino. His phone lay beside him. Messages and emails kept popping up, but he ignored them, just like the newspaper that rested beside it.

“If you have important business to conduct, I don’t mind, you know?” I motioned to his phone. “Danilo always checked emails at the dining table.” Eventually, I too had chatted with Giorgia or other friends during our meals.

Samuel gave a terse shake of his head. “It’s rude. At home, we tried to focus on the people at the table with us. I work all day. During meals, I’m off.”

“Oh, that’s nice.” I liked the idea of being one hundred percent present during a meal, focusing on eye contact and conversation, even if it would be awkward initially because Samuel and I were near strangers. “But how do you not miss anything urgent?”

Samuel smirked. “Is that how Danilo justified being on the phone all the damn time?”

I furrowed my brows. “Yes.” I took a deep breath because what I had to say next might make Samuel angry, and maybe I shouldn’t do that as a

newlywed wife, but I didn’t want to have to swallow down when I felt uncomfortable. “I know you don’t like my brother, and he doesn’t like you, but could you at least try not to bash him constantly? If not for me, then at least for Sofia. We’re family now.”

Samuel sighed and leaned back in his chair. “You’re right. He’s your brother, and differences aside, he always took good care of you. Except for agreeing to this marriage.”

I blinked. “Excuse me? Why would you say that?”

“Because I’m not a good deal, and you’ll realize it one day.”

“You could just tell me now.”

He chuckled without any mirth. “I could, but I won’t. Because I don’t want to ruin this marriage before it’s really started.”

“I’d like this marriage to work out. Don’t you?”

“I do,” he said quietly, but I could hear the doubt in his voice.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Samuel

I wasn’t sure why I had told Emma I was a bad deal. It was true, but telling her didn’t serve any purpose. She sipped her cappuccino silently, obviously frustrated. She had every right to be. I wasn’t in the mood to discuss this topic more, so I decided to distract her. “How would you like a tour of the house and garden now?”

She glanced up and gave me a small smile. “I’d love that.”

I rose to my feet and waited for her to wheel back from the table. “Would you like me to push you?” In our short interactions so far, I’d quickly realized that Emma liked her independence. I had no intention of coddling her. I was relieved that she seemed much tougher than I’d thought. Maybe she could handle all the shit that came with being married to me.

“I’ll follow you. I’d like to see your face when you tell me about the house.”

“Last night was only the third night I spent here, so I don’t know that much more about its hidden corners than you do.”

She tilted her head. “You bought the house a while ago. Why didn’t you move sooner?”

I could have lied and told her my father preferred to have me close for business reasons, but the truth was simple. “It might seem odd, but I prefer company. Living alone in a house didn’t really seem appealing to me. I had all the freedom I wanted at my parents’ house, so I stayed.”

Emma nodded. “That makes sense. You have a hard job, so having family at home afterward is important.”

I nodded. After tough days, I’d often have a drink with Dad in the office.

“You can rely on me, Samuel. I won’t ever break your trust.” She flushed. As usual, Emma looked lovely, sweet, and sexy.

I motioned to the front window. “Let’s start with the view from the porch.” I strode toward the double doors and swung them open. The view over the lake was spectacular. Emma rolled out, and her entire face lit up. She pointed at the wide but narrow fireplace in front of two comfy deck chairs.

“It’s gas, but it’s cozy.” I turned it on with a remote, and the flames flickered up at once. It wasn’t as nice in bright daylight as it was in the dark.

“You still enjoy swimming?” I asked. I remembered from our trip to the Cavallaro mansion two years ago that she’d been ecstatic about swimming in the lake there. I had only been there to guard my sister Sofia back then and had hardly talked to Emma at all. Maybe I should have made an effort.

“Yes, I went to an indoor swimming pool once a week when I still lived in Indianapolis. I hope I can find a good place to swim here.”

“I have a small surprise.” I led Emma through the dining area followed by the vast living area with a wood fireplace to the wide double doors on the back of the mansion overlooking the sprawling backyard.

I opened those doors, and Emma’s eyes widened in utter shock as they took in the big swimming pool a few steps below the terrace. A ramp had been installed so Emma could easily move down to that level.

“That isn’t a small surprise. It’s huge!” she said. She reached for my hand and squeezed, her eyes emotional. “For being such a bad deal, you’re doing lots of thoughtful things. It’s misleading.”

I cleared my throat. “It’s nothing.”

She shook her head and released me, then moved down the ramp to take a closer look at the pool. “I wish I could take a dip right away.”

“It’s still two hours before our families arrive. Plenty of time.”

“Not if I have to shower, then style my hair afterward and put on fresh makeup.”

I made a clueless face. Emma giggled and allowed her eyes to take in the rest of the garden: an immaculate lawn, a few perfectly round bushes, a paved path, and a few flower beds with white flowers.

“I can’t wait to have a garden being lived in, played in. This looks like an exhibition garden.”

For a moment, longing reflected on Emma’s face, but then she turned to me with a smile. “Can you show me the rest? Even the kitchen?”

I nodded and led her back inside. We ended our tour in the kitchen, where Azzurra was busy cooking up a feast for lunch. I took a deep breath, taking in the delicious scents. Emma did the same and let out a sigh. “That smells delicious. What is it?”

Azzurra pointed at the pots. “As *primi*, tortelli al ragú will be served.” Emma wheeled closer to the stove.

“What’s the filling?”

On the counter, freshly made tortellini were lined up. “Ricotta and spinach.”

“Could I try the meat sauce?”

“Of course!” Azzurra dipped a spoon into the sauce and handed it to Emma, who pushed it into her mouth and licked it clean, sending images of a very different nature through my head. She moaned, and the images became even more explicit.

“This is delicious!”

Azzurra beamed and opened the oven. “Secondi will be cinghiale alla cacciatore.”

“My father loves wild boar stew,” I said.

“I do too,” Emma said delightedly.

“What about you, Mr. Mione?”

“Samuel,” I corrected as I’d done a few times before. “I love it too but not with the same childhood fervor as my father.”

Emma wheeled past Azzurra toward a chocolate cake. “Torta al cioccolato!”

Her excited expression made me laugh. “I assume you like chocolate?”

“I love chocolate. In any shape and form.”

I made a mental note to add chocolate truffles to the list of gifts Emma would receive—not just for special days but also when I messed up.

The lunch with our families was relaxed. Even Danilo and Samuel managed civilized conversation throughout the entire meal. Of course, Danilo kept throwing me searching looks. The moment we were alone, he would definitely inquire whether Samuel was treating me right.

I hadn’t eaten as much of the first two courses as I could have because I wanted to leave some room for the dessert.

When Azzurra served the cake, I could barely restrain myself. Luckily, she had more manners than me and served our guests first. Samuel sent me a knowing look, and I flushed.

The cake was as delicious as I’d expected. Azzurra had sprinkled pine nuts on top, and if I wasn’t mistaken, she’d even added some ground pine nut to the dough. I closed my eyes to really savor the richness of the chocolate. When I opened my eyes, Samuel watched me with an intense look that made me blush hard.

After lunch, Ines, Sofia, and I moved out to the porch. I turned on the gas fireplace. We looked out over the lake and allowed the silence to settle around us for a few minutes. The men had retreated to Samuel’s office, a big room with a desk, cozy leather couches, and a fireplace, to discuss business and probably have a drink.

Azzurra came out. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Could you ask my husband to make me a hanky-panky? I’m sure Samuel has everything it needs in his office.”

My eyebrows shot up. I had a very different image in mind when I thought about hanky-panky.

Azzurra nodded, then glanced at us.

“Amaretto sour for me. Samuel can make it,” Sofia said without missing a beat despite Ines’s curious look.

I had drunk two glasses of wine for lunch, so I definitely couldn’t have anything else. However, I didn’t want to be the only one who didn’t order anything. “Uhh…what would you recommend?”

Azzurra looked like a deer in the headlights. “Espresso martini?”

I nodded, even if I’d never had one before, and it sounded like a combination for sleepless nights.

Azzurra disappeared.

Ines sighed. “You’re both under twenty-one. I’m pretty sure I should stop you from drinking.”

Sofia huffed. “We can be married off to men ten years our senior who kill for fun and work, and we can bear their babies. I think it’s fine, Mom.” She hadn’t said it meanly, but I didn’t miss the bitter note in her tone.

What was Danilo doing? Sofia was such a sweet and kind girl. They had seemed to get along better yesterday and today.

Ines sighed again. “I hope you’re at least happy with your marriage so far?”

I blushed. What could I say? “Samuel’s been very kind so far.”

Sofia gave me a doubtful look, but Ines seemed relieved to hear it.

Not long after, Azzurra returned with a tablet and three glasses.

“You can go home now. You worked so hard today,” I said with a grateful smile as I took the espresso martini.

Azzurra gave a small nod and slipped away.

Ines, Sofia, and I clinked glasses and then took a sip. The cocktail was delicious but way too strong for me. I put it down on the side table. I didn’t want to risk being drunk on our second night as a married couple. Though some liquid courage wouldn’t be the worst. I’d really love to be intimate with Samuel again, even if I was still a little sore, but I wasn’t sure if he’d initiate anything.

Danilo appeared in the doorway. Sofia looked up at him with a pinched expression. “Are we leaving already?”

“No,” he said matter-of-factly, as warm as a piece of brick. His eyes found mine. “I’d like to talk to you, Emma.”

I stifled a small smile. I would have been surprised if that wouldn’t have been the case, but I would have to give him a piece of my mind regarding Sofia. If he thought he could meddle in my marriage, then he couldn’t expect me not to do the same with his.

I followed Danilo into the living room. He turned to me, his expression softer but also filled with a deep brotherly concern. “Is there anything I should know?”

I raised my eyebrows, amused. “I’m sure there are plenty of things in the world you should show a greater interest in.”

Danilo moved closer and got down on his haunches in front of me. “Last night, I couldn’t stop wondering if I should have stopped this marriage from happening.”

“You were the one who agreed to it in the first place, Danilo.”

His expression became wary. “Did he treat you right?”

A blush crept up my throat and cheeks. I couldn’t hold Danilo’s gaze. “He treated me like a wife should be treated by her husband.”

“That doesn’t constitute for much in our world,” he drawled. “If he hurt __”

Danilo shot to his feet before Samuel even spoke up. He stood in the doorway. Unlike my brother, I hadn’t heard him approach.

Samuel’s eyes locked on my brother as he strode into the living room in long, confident strides. “I ask you not to shove your nose into my private business.” Samuel stopped in front of my brother. They were the same height. The air bristled with their dominance as they tried to stare each other down. It was clear they had a long history of these stare downs. Samuel smiled in a way that made me nervous. “But I can assure you I took all the necessary precautions to hurt your sister as little as possible on her first night.”

Boom. My mouth fell open, and blood shot so rapidly into my face, I was sure I would combust. Did he really just say that in front of my brother?

Danilo rocked forward as if he was going to attack Samuel, who braced himself. Then both men looked at me, and my brother straightened, righted his tie, and turned to me. He kissed my forehead and strode out without another word.

Samuel regarded me coolly. He pushed his hands into his pants. “I know this was quite embarrassing for you. But your brother has dropped very similar comments about both my sisters in the past, so it was time he got a taste of his own medicine.”

I gave him a doubtful look. “Do you always share details like that with other men?” I felt very uncomfortable thinking that other men would know about what happened behind closed doors.

Samuel stepped up to me and touched my shoulder. “No. I don’t intend to share any kind of information about our life, especially what happens in our bedroom with others.”

“Okay.” I could feel my face cooling off. “I would like to return to Sofia and your mother.”

Samuel nodded. “I should probably make sure Danilo doesn’t say anything to my father that causes an unpleasant atmosphere.”

I scoffed. “Good luck.”

Once our families took their leave, Samuel joined me on the porch in front of the fireplace. The lights from the other houses reflected on the surface of the lake like doors to another sphere.

Samuel had a tumbler with a generous amount of a dark amber spirit in his hand. I could still feel the gentle buzz from the wine and that one sip of the espresso martini, but Samuel obviously could tolerate far more alcohol. He had drunk four glasses of wine for dinner, plus whatever Danilo, Pietro, and he had consumed in the office, which likely hadn’t been little, and now the tumbler. I had to admit I worried how well his body tolerated the amount of alcohol. It indicated that it had a lot of practice.

“Danilo said he and Sofia will return to Indianapolis tomorrow.”

I nodded. “Danilo told me.” I’d hoped he’d spend a few more days here with me to make the transition easier. Giorgia had already returned to Indianapolis early in the morning because her brother needed to get back. And now my brother, the last link to my old life, will follow tomorrow.

Samuel regarded me with a thoughtful expression over his glass. “Will you be okay?”

“Yes,” I said firmly. I would be. “I just need to adjust to my new life.”

“Whatever you need, tell me. I’ll have a bodyguard in the house whenever I’m not present. I’ll introduce you tomorrow morning before I leave for work.”

So soon? I didn’t voice my thoughts. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. This wasn’t a dramatic love story where the protagonists couldn’t bear the idea of being separated.

“I hope he won’t hover. I don’t like to be watched,” I said.

“He’s very good at what he does. He’ll spend most of the time in the staff room beside the kitchen unless you require his assistance.”

Samuel glanced at his watch, an elegant, dark blue Patek Philippe Aquanaut. “I should probably head to bed. I have an early meeting at eight because of a shipment of slot machines.”

I stifled a yawn. It was already eleven, and I was usually an early riser, which meant I went to bed around ten at the latest. “I’ll come with you.”

Samuel downed his drink and pushed to his feet. He motioned for me to go first so I moved toward the doors, which he then held open for me. “Thank you.”

Samuel was being very considerate and polite, and that was nice in a way, but at the same time, it emphasized that we were still strangers. This didn’t feel like a married couple going to bed together. None of the lightheartedness, banter, and intimacy a normal marriage entailed.

When we arrived in the bedroom, my eyes involuntarily moved to the bed and what had happened last night. I’d felt empowered and womanly. It had been a far better first time than I’d ever dared hope for, and now I wished for more. Samuel cleared his throat, his gaze intent as it settled on me. “Go ahead. Get ready first.”

I moved into the bathroom and changed into another off-white silk nightgown with lace trimming, then returned to the bedroom. Samuel

checked his phone in the middle of the room, his brows furrowed. His shirt was unbuttoned, revealing his muscled upper body and the line of dark blond hair disappearing in his pants. His belt hung loosely around his waist, and the top button of his pants was open. I wished I were brave enough to go to him and unzip his pants. Brave enough to show Samuel what I wanted.

Samuel didn't notice my entrance immediately. He was immersed in his phone, but eventually, he looked up and pushed his phone in his pants. He gave me a distracted smile and brushed past me into the bathroom.

I wheeled toward the bed and frowned when I spotted his phone on the nightstand. He had two phones?

Worry and suspicion filled me. I wanted to come up with an innocent explanation. Many people had a business phone and one for their private life, but Samuel was a Made Man and future Underboss, so business was closely interwoven with his private life. There was no clear line separating the two.

I tried not to let my imagination run rampant, but a nagging voice suggested Samuel used a second phone for a mistress. It wasn't uncommon for men in our world to have a mistress. Many of them were there before the marriage.

I could only imagine what my mother would say if I suggested Samuel had an affair. She'd implore me to turn a blind eye to it and be happy for this good catch. I took a deep breath and hoisted myself into the bed. I had half a mind to call Giorgia, but I didn't want to wake her with unfounded suspicions, and Samuel could return any moment.

I could simply ask Samuel.

Samuel emerged from the bathroom at that moment, but instead of coming to the bed right away, he walked toward the walk-in closet and put something in the pocket of the jacket he would wear tomorrow.

My belly tightened.

When Samuel finally climbed into bed, I couldn't bring myself to confront him.

Instead, I gave him a shaky smile.

He hesitated as if he wanted to say something, but then he returned my smile. "Sleep well." Again, he hesitated.

He turned off the light and rolled over to face away from me.

I swallowed hard, agitated. My stomach churned as if I'd eaten too much and topped it off with soda.

As expected, we fell asleep on our respective sides of the bed without any physical contact.

I wasn't sure when I actually fell asleep. My mind kept obsessing over Samuel's second phone. I had to find out what it was about. I couldn't confront Samuel if I didn't have any hints.

And even then…

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Samuel’s alarm woke me. He got up before I had even managed to open my eyes. Being an early bird was definitely harder after I had wine.

I sat up and quickly slid into my wheelchair. Samuel disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door.

With a cautious glance at the closed door, I hurried toward the walk-in closet.

Samuel’s taupe jacket hung from a coat stand. I reached up and fumbled for the pocket. When I felt something solid, I tried to reach in. I pushed myself up and finally managed to grip the phone. I listened closely. The water in the bathroom was still running. I stared at the screen. When I touched the screen, I could see the beginning of a Whatsapp message from a person called F. The message read: When can we see each other again?

My pulse raced as my thoughts tumbled over each other. What swipe gesture had Samuel used to unlock his other phone? Maybe it was the same for this.

I tried an inverted L, but that didn’t work. Then an L with a 45 degree angle instead of ninety, but still nothing.

The click of the doorknob being turned made me look up. The shower wasn't running anymore. I pushed up and shoved the phone back into the jacket pocket then plopped down. I didn't have time to move out of the walk-in closet though before Samuel walked out of the bathroom. His eyes moved from the vacant bed to me. His brows puckered. "Are you looking for something?"

"Uh, I forgot that my clothes still haven't been moved out of my luggage."

I motioned to the three suitcases beside my side of the bed.

Samuel gave a slow nod. He came toward me, only in boxers. With the narrow space of the closet, he stood very close to me as he grabbed his white shirt and suit from the hangers. After having read the message from F., having him so close was difficult. I wheeled out so he could dress. I could feel his eyes on me as I rummaged through the suitcase, which lay propped up on a suitcase holder.

"I'm in a hurry. I don't think we'll have time to have breakfast together."

"That's okay," I said without looking up from my suitcase as if I had to solve a difficult math equation and not just pick an outfit for the day.

"All right," he said slowly. After a moment of silence, he finally walked out.

I sucked in a deep breath and closed my eyes against the deep sense of despair. I balled my hands to fists and counted to five until I had a grip on myself. During the desperate moments of my recovery, I'd often counted to five, ten, or sometimes even much higher to calm myself. When I opened my eyes again, I felt more in control.

I picked my favorite summer dress with a floral print and spaghetti straps. I stayed barefoot, not in the mood to wear the same shoes as yesterday, and the others were still downstairs in packages.

Without Samuel at the table, I chatted with Giorgia during breakfast and told her what I'd witnessed. She messaged me back at once.

That's suspicious. But there could still be another explanation.

Azzurra came in. I hadn't touched the cornetto on my plate yet and had only taken a sip of my cappuccino. The events of the morning had spoiled my appetite.

“Mrs. Mione is here to see you.”

Ines poked her head in behind Azzurra with an apologetic smile. “Can I come in? I hope I don’t interrupt you?”

“Ines, good morning,” I said in surprise and turned my phone off. I didn’t want Ines to find out I suspected her son of infidelity. “Please come in. Do you want to join me for breakfast?”

Ines came over and kissed my cheeks in greeting before she sank down across from me in Samuel’s place. “I only had a fruit salad…” She eyed the assortment of pastries. “Oh well.” She picked up a cornetto and smiled as she took a bite.

“Did Samuel ask you to come over to keep an eye on me because he worried I can’t be alone?” I motioned at the wheelchair.

Ines smiled, a hint of embarrassment playing across her face. “He called me this morning and asked if I could come over to help you put your clothes in the closet.”

“That’s all?”

She let out a laugh. “He’s worried because this is a new house for you, and you don’t know anyone yet.”

“I’m used to spending lots of time on my own in a house. I can handle it, especially because Samuel made sure the house is accessible.”

“Don’t be mad at him. I’m sure he’ll soon see that you can handle the situation.”

I definitely wasn’t mad at Samuel for trying to help. I was angry because of his second phone. I nodded. “Don’t worry, I’m not. We don’t know each other very well yet. He’ll soon realize that I’m more than capable of handling myself and more.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it!” Ines chuckled. “Which is why I asked the priest in our community if you can help. We have a sort of self-help group for Made Men and their families with disabilities that our priest leads.”

“Thank you. If you give me his contact information, I’ll try to be useful as soon as possible.”

After breakfast, Ines and I moved on to the bedroom. I realized I still hadn't seen my bodyguard. Because Samuel had left so abruptly in the morning, he didn't introduce me to him.

"My shoes and most of my bags are still down in the lobby in boxes," I said when we entered the bedroom together.

"I could ask Leo, your bodyguard, if you want. Have you met him yet?"

"No," I said, sparing Ines the details of my morning.

"Let me give him a call." She picked up her phone and gave him instructions on where to find the boxes. She ended the call. "He was Sofia's bodyguard before she married your brother. Samuel thought it was a good idea to have him become your personal bodyguard, and I agree. He's very discreet, professional, and vigilant. Let me give you his number. Samuel's head is always at work. It might be a while before he remembers to give you the details you need to really thrive here."

He had his head with a certain F. too. I tried to push the thought aside because it was ruining my day. There wasn't anything I could do about it now.

Ines put a hand on my shoulder. "Are you not feeling well?"

"I'm just a little tired. I didn't sleep all that well."

A knock on the door interrupted our conversation.

"Come in," Ines and I said at the same time. She gave me an apologetic smile and stepped into the background. "This is your home. I'm sorry."

I sent her a smile to show her it was okay.

A tall, very bulky man with a neck like a bull came in carrying two boxes. "Where should I put them?"

"In front of the walk-in closet, please," I said, motioning in that direction. He put them down where I pointed, then turned to me. He wasn't as young as I'd suspected. Maybe in his late forties, but he would definitely scare away many people. He had a buzz cut, and his T-shirt strained over his muscles. Tattoos of a woman and five children graced his right arm. I

had to admit I never understood why someone got a detailed portrait of their loved ones tattooed into their skin. They rarely resembled the real person. They creeped me out like Madame Tussauds wax figures.

He gave me a broad smile. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Mione.” He glanced at Ines. “And to see you again, Mrs., uh, Mione.”

I laughed. “How about you call me Emma? It’s less confusing.”

“And I’ve told you before that I’m Ines.”

He shrugged.

“How are your children?” Ines asked.

“The boy’s going to give me a heart attack. I should have been happy with my four girls and not tried for a fifth.”

I burst out laughing. I could tell he loved his son very much and wasn’t serious. “How old is he?”

“Seven.” He made a suffering face. “My wife wants another one, but I told her only if she wants to kill me. I’m too old.”

“You’re not old! You’re my age,” Ines said.

“I can’t argue with that.”

I grinned, relieved that I had such a nice bodyguard. It could get awkward if someone sour or moody guarded you all day.

“Do you need help with unpacking?” he asked, nodding toward the boxes.

“No, thank you.” I preferred to sort my clothes into the wardrobe without a male presence.

He tipped an invisible hat and moved outside. “You know where to find me.”

I turned to Ines once he was gone. “He’s really nice.”

“He was Sofia’s favorite. She had another bodyguard who shared the job with Leo, but he’s a bit broodier to say it nicely.” Ines gestured to the boxes. “Should we get started?”

I nodded. I really wanted all of my clothes within reach.

We began with the shoes, then quickly moved on to my suitcases. When I removed a few dresses that I had packed for nostalgic reasons, even if I hadn’t worn them in more than a year, a few photos fell out. Photos of myself before the accident. Photos of me dancing on stage, photos of me doing a grand jete, my favorite ballet jump. I swallowed hard. I had forgotten I’d hidden them beneath my clothes. In the past, I’d often taken

them out and looked at them, feeling wistful, and a part of me still did. It would probably never change, but another part longed to dance again. I had always suppressed any thought of dancing, but since my wedding, a new desire to dance had formed, and I was determined to finally give in to it.

Ines cleared her throat, a look of uncertainty on her face. “Are you okay?”

I smiled. “I am, yes.” I held up the photos. “I forgot about these.”

Ines scanned the photos and touched my arm. “I can tell you did ballet from the way you hold yourself and move your fingers and arms. You exude elegance.”

“Oh wow, thank you. Did you do ballet?”

“For a while as a girl before my father decided I shouldn’t wear leotards.”

I nodded. I put the photos into one of the drawers.

“I loved seeing you and Samuel dance. Maybe you could take lessons? If you miss dancing.”

“I do. I guess I’ll have to think about it.” I decided to change the topic as dancing felt personal in a way I couldn’t explain. “Are people still talking about the marriage? About me?”

I didn’t even want to imagine the vicious turn the gossip would take if people found out about a mistress. I hated being pitied. I needed to figure out a way to handle the situation in a way that saved me from heartache and pathetic glances.

“Some do,” Ines said hesitantly, then gave me a reassuring smile. “Don’t mind them. You’re now Samuel’s wife, and that’s all that matters. I’m very happy about it.”

I tilted my head, trying to gauge if Ines really meant it. She was a kind woman, but she was also raised in the mafia, and tolerating people who weren’t perfect by our society’s standards wasn’t our world’s forte. “That’s very sweet of you to say.”

Ines put down a scarf she was about to put on a higher shelf for my winter wardrobe. “I’m being serious, Emma. I’m going to be very open. I was concerned in the beginning. Samuel’s had a few tough years with his sister being kidnapped and some of his friends dying, and just the overall conflict with the Camorra. I wanted a strong but caring woman at his side.”

People needed to stop thinking my wheelchair made me weak in any way. If anything, my struggles have made me stronger. I was fairly sure I could handle almost anything.

I opened my mouth to tell her that my wheelchair didn't mean I wasn't strong and caring, but she raised a palm to stop me and continued, "I don't know you very well, but what I've seen so far convinced me that you can be that woman for Samuel."

"I'll do my best to be a good wife, *if he lets me*."

Ines smiled bitterly. "He can be stubborn and withdrawn. Like his father, he prefers to swallow his problems until they burst out of him. I hope he'll be a good husband. I know he has it in him, but sometimes he's his own worst enemy."

I was surprised by Ines's openness, but at the same time relieved that she didn't see Samuel as some sort of saint.

Ines opened the last suitcase, and a heap of lingerie fell out. They were mostly new. I had bought them with Samuel in mind, though I really enjoyed wearing sexy underwear for my own well-being too.

"No reason to be embarrassed." Ines picked up my underwear, then put it in the drawer I had picked for it.

We finished unpacking in the early afternoon and had coffee together.

"Would you mind if I take a dip in your pool? We don't have one, and it's been too long since I've swum."

"Of course I don't mind. You can have one of my bikinis." I was glad that Ines wanted to spend a bit more time with me. Maybe she could sense that I longed for company today. I really liked her, which was a relief.

While Ines swam a few laps in the pool, I researched things to do in Minneapolis apart from the charity work I wanted to begin as soon as possible. I stumbled upon an inclusive dance studio that had several dance courses for people with disabilities or, as they put it, differently abled. I loved the term. Everything from breakdance over jazz dance, standard dances to ballet. I felt a deep ache inside me, not necessarily for ballet but for dancing, for moving my body in rhythm with music.

It was a public studio, so I wasn't sure how happy Samuel would be if I went there. I wasn't sure if I even wanted to tell him about it. Maybe I could just ask Leo to take me there and pretend he was my husband. Though, Samuel probably wouldn't be impressed by such a move.

I'd simply discuss my plans with him tonight after asking him about F.

My belly constricted with nerves just thinking about that confrontation.

When Ines returned to the porch after taking a shower, once again perfectly dressed in a skirt and short-sleeved blouse, she sank down beside me.

"It's getting late. I should leave so you can have a nice evening with Samuel."

I wasn't so sure about the nice part, but I definitely needed to be alone with Samuel.

My phone beeped with a text from Samuel telling me that he'd be late, and I should eat without him.

"Samuel's working late."

Her face pinched in disapproval. "Would you like me to stay?"

"Are you sure? What about your husband?"

"I'll send him a message. He had a business lunch anyway. I'm sure he won't mind."

Eating with Ines was nice, but my mind kept drifting to Samuel and what he was doing. Ines hadn't mentioned her husband working late, but wouldn't he if things were so busy?

I didn't want to be the jealous bride, but I wondered if Samuel was with another woman, with that F.

The whispers of other people finally got to me, their assumption that a man like Samuel would have a mistress in a marriage with someone like me. As if I was incapable of fulfilling his needs. And even if that were the case, that didn't mean the vows of fidelity were void.

I needed to know. The chances of getting an honest answer probably weren't too high, but maybe his reaction would give him away.

When Samuel finally came home late at night, he looked surprised when I was still up and waiting for him in the bedroom. I put down the book I'd been reading and looked at him. My bravado dwindled seeing his eyes. I hated conflict, and this early on in our marriage, I could do lasting damage, but I needed to speak my mind, or I'd go insane.

"Are you all right?" Samuel asked as he opened his cuffs. For some reason, the movement made me long for his touch, for what we had on our wedding night.

The muscles in his forearms flexed, and I could hardly look away. It would have been easier to keep watching him and duck away from the questions tingling on my tongue.

I cleared my throat. “You agreed to marry me.”

Samuel’s brows drew together. He was obviously unsure where I was going with this. I, myself, wasn’t sure how to speak my mind.

“Maybe I’m not what some people in our world consider a good catch, and perhaps some people even believe I can’t be a good wife, but I’m just as capable as any other woman. I also expect to be treated with respect, and for me, that includes faithfulness or, at the very least, honesty. If you are with someone else, I want to know.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Maybe this would mark the end of our marriage before it had even really begun. My mouth turned dry when the last words left my mouth.

Samuel dropped his hands from their task of unbuttoning his shirt. “What makes you think I would be with another woman?” he asked quietly, his gaze so intent I had trouble not looking away.

I felt inexplicably stupid blaming his possible infidelity on my wheelchair, especially since I’d been the one who told him it wasn’t as big a deal as many people thought.

Maybe he saw it because his frown deepened, becoming almost foreboding. Of course, that only made him more attractive. Samuel was a man who always looked good, and sometimes he looked completely breathtaking. “My parents have been married for thirty years. My father taught me that loyalty and faithfulness are the key to a marriage. I wouldn’t dishonor you by cheating on you, Emma. There isn’t another woman, and there won’t be.”

I swallowed. I could tell he was being serious. Actually, he seemed almost angry that I’d dared to accuse him at all. But what about F.? Was he

really that good a liar? If that were the case, our marriage would be doomed. I blushed at my next words, feeling ashamed for my actions. “You have two phones, and this morning an F. told you she misses you.”

Samuel’s face became stone, as cold and as unrelenting, but the look of disappointment and anger in his eyes was worse. “You spied on me?”

I swallowed hard. “You hid your second phone from me, and the message from F. popped up on your screen.”

He stared off to the side, his gaze distant as if contemplating what to tell me. “You don’t trust me.”

Anger surged through me. “How could I? I’d love to give you the benefit of the doubt, but I know how some men in our world are, and I know how many people perceive me. I won’t lie to myself, and I don’t want you to lie to me either.”

Samuel took a step closer, his eyes blazing with fury. “You shouldn’t listen to what other people say. You should care how I perceive you. And I haven’t given you a reason to distrust me. I have two phones because I’m not only in contact with Outfit members. I have to deal with many creeps from other organizations that I’d like to keep separate.”

Was he telling the truth? Then why had the message sounded very intimate, not like something business acquaintances wrote each other? Was I imagining things? “You haven’t tried to have sex with me again.”

I sank my teeth into my lower lip before my mouth could spew more word vomit.

“Ideally, I’d have sex with you again very soon,” he said with a hint of a smirk that immediately sent sparks through my body. “But sex in a marriage isn’t a one-way road.”

“But why didn’t you try anything after our wedding night?”

Samuel still stood in his half-unbuttoned shirt with those rolled-up sleeves in front of me, and with every word out of his mouth, I wanted him more. “I didn’t want to push you into anything you weren’t ready for. You could be sore.”

I was still a little sore. “You could have asked me or tried to initiate something, and I would have told you no if I didn’t want it.”

Not that any part of me didn’t want to be with Samuel. I still tingled when I thought of Samuel’s fingers on me. My body and mind screamed yes.

“You could have initiated things,” Samuel suggested as if it were the easiest thing in the world, and to him, it probably was. I didn’t often think about our age gap, but the eight and a half years he had on me meant he’d been having sex for a long time. Most guys in our world began at fourteen or fifteen, so he’d been sexually active for twelve years. A new wave of nerves filled me.

My cheeks burned fiercely. I fumbled with the covers. “If I had more experience, maybe I would have…” That was a lie. My fear of being rejected by him would have been too great. Our bond was still too fresh for me to be anywhere near being confident enough for a move like that. “But you have at least twelve years of experience on me! You have probably slept with more women than I have shoes in my wardrobe!”

Samuel cocked an eyebrow. Damn him for looking like a woman’s dream. His gaze flitted to the rows of shoes lined up on the open shelves in the walk-in wardrobe, and his answering smirk made anger and desire battle in my insides. I tried to remember how many shoes were on display. Since Anna had told me I looked good in heels, I’d gone on a few unhealthy shopping sprees.

“You need to buy more shoes,” he said with a chuckle.

I stared at him indignantly, but at the same time, the banter did strange things to my belly. “Don’t tempt me.”

“So what about the matter at hand? Why didn’t you approach me? Like you said, you are the innocent part in our bond, and some might say I was being considerate by not demanding anything from you.”

“There’s a difference between demanding and initiating,” I said firmly.

“I don’t know you very well. I wasn’t sure if you would have had the backbone to say no.” For some reason, his voice had become lower over the course of our conversation.

“Oh,” I said. I hadn’t seen it from his angle yet. “That makes sense… but I would prefer it if you’d take the initiative for now.”

Samuel stepped closer to the bed. The top buttons of his shirt were open and gave me a very distracting view of his chest. “I don’t have a problem with that as long as you want to have sex with me.”

“I want to,” I whispered despite the heat crawling up my throat.

Samuel loosened his tie, never taking his eyes off me. “Good,” he murmured. He leaned over me, cupped my face, and kissed me. His kiss

tasted of whisky or brandy, I couldn’t tell, and was gentle at first but soon became more demanding. My body responded immediately. My core tightened, and an insistent tingling started between my legs. Samuel shoved back the covers and climbed between my thighs. His erection pressed against my core when he stretched out on top of me. His kiss, just like the first time, set my body aflame. And the feel of his weight between my legs? I couldn’t get enough of it, especially the pressure of his length exactly where I needed it.

Samuel rocked against me lightly while he kissed me, and the friction was almost enough to make me come. I hadn’t even realized how much our conversation had already turned me on. I hesitantly slid one hand into his hair and put the other on his back. Samuel pulled back. “I’m yours. You can touch me however you want.”

I let out a choked breath. *Mine*. It still seemed impossible.

Samuel kissed my throat, one of his hands slipping under my nightgown, up my side until he cupped my breast. When my nipple puckered against his palm, he rocked his erection against my core again, and I moaned against his mouth. I wanted more, so much more. I’d have never thought that a simple touch could ignite me with so much desire.

When I heard Emma’s soft moan, my cock jerked inside my pants, making me aware that I still had too many clothes on, but this was about Emma,

about showing her how good I could make her feel if only she'd let me.

She writhed on the mattress as I teased her nipples. She wanted more. Her body sent a clear message. I slid a hand down the tantalizing curves of her body, then inside her panties, until my fingers found her clit. She was so wet, my fingertip slipped over her button, tearing another moan from her lips. She squeezed her eyes shut as if trying to keep herself in check. I pressed my lips against her ear. "Don't hold back. In our bedroom, there's no need for shame or restraint. I want all of you."

She met my gaze, surprise and wonder in her eyes. Her skin was flushed, and her lips parted as I began to rub small circles on her nub. I kissed her, needing to taste her plump lips.

"You're close," I rasped between kisses as her breathing became more labored. She didn't react, only clung to my shoulder, focusing on my chest.

"I would ask you if you like it, but this—" I slid one finger over her opening, which was slick with arousal. She blushed, and a small, strange sound escaped her lips.

She bit her lip, the desire in her eyes flickering up.

"What do you want?" I rasped.

Her gaze flitted to my finger once more.

"Inside you?"

I was going to lose my mind at any second. My cock was ready to bust out of my pants. She gave a small nod, uncertainty and embarrassment crowding her face as if it were a bad thing to want my finger inside her when it turned me on.

I brushed my lips over her throat and moved them down until I cupped her nipple. My fingers found her entrance once more, and I slowly eased a finger inside. She was still tight and tensed briefly, so I stilled and looked up at her face.

"Still sore?" I rumbled.

The knowledge of why she was sore made me even hungrier for more. Maybe we really were nothing more than instinct-driven beasts.

"A bit, but I don't want you to stop," she admitted with a small smile.

"Oh, I have no intention of stopping, not until you come all over my fingers and cock."

Her eyes widened slightly, then fluttered shut. She moaned when I pushed my finger deeper into her pussy and began to curl it slightly while

my thumb brushed her clit. I regarded her attentively while my finger pumped in and out, trying to gauge when she'd be ready for another finger and my cock.

I could tell that the deeper, slower sensation of my finger stroking along her sensitive opening really turned her on. The scent of her arousal reached my nose, calling to a primal part to finally claim her again, but I didn't want to rush things. Emma was still very inexperienced and obviously sore. I couldn't just stick it in. I had all the time in the world as I fingered her. Eventually, I brushed a second finger over her opening and slid it in. There was no resistance. By now, she was completely soaked from my ministrations. She moaned again, her muscles clenching around my fingers. I moved them faster, my thumb circling her clit with more intensity. She clung to my arm, and her eyes squeezed shut a moment before her walls tightened their grip even more, and she moaned loudly. She shoved her head back into the pillow, revealing her beautiful, elegant throat, and I couldn't stop myself from kissing, then biting it lightly, causing her to shudder and clench even harder.

I slowed my movements until Emma relaxed, but I could tell her body still yearned for more.

I gently pulled out, and her lips fell open in a near protest at the loss of my touch. Stifling a grin, I stood and undressed completely.

I stepped closer to the bed but didn't climb in right away as Emma was busy discovering my body with her eyes. I wasn't shy. I knew the effect my body had on women. It wasn't the part of me I wanted to hide. Seeing Emma's desire and admiration as her gaze followed my abs down to my cock, I felt proud. I felt the same way when I looked at her gorgeous body.

"How about we get on equal footing?" I said in a low voice and reached for her nightgown. Emma sat up and helped me drag it over her head. I tossed it to the floor, then slid her soaked panties down Emma's legs. I held them up to show Emma how eager her body was for what we were doing. She blushed deeply, but she didn't look away. I could see in her eyes how pleased she was with her body. Maybe she had been worried about how well it would react to sex. She had worried for nothing. I dropped the tiny thing on the floor as well. I climbed back on the bed and knelt before her. I ran my fingernails up and down over her legs with more pressure than I would usually use to see her reaction. When I got close to her pussy, her

lips parted in a moan, so I focused my ministrations there. I massaged her inner thighs for a while, but my cock was ready to explode. I gripped her ankles and lifted her legs to my shoulders, then looked at her. “Okay?”

She gave a quick nod, obviously a bit overwhelmed by the situation.

I moved even closer until my knees touched the back of her thighs and my tip brushed her pussy lips. Soon, it glistened with her arousal. I rubbed my tip over her clit slowly before I dipped between her folds. My tip brushed over her opening, but instead of entering, I moved back up until my now glistening tip pressed against her clit. I could tell Emma was close to bursting. I leaned over her and guided my cock to her opening.

With my eyes on hers, I pushed in slowly. Her walls gripped my cock so tightly that I gritted my teeth against the intense need to spill my cum. I’d fuck Emma senseless first and get another orgasm from her before my cock could shoot its load.

When I was almost all the way in, I paused to allow Emma to catch her breath and her body to adapt to my cock. This new position allowed a deeper penetration that might be too much for her second time, so I wanted to give her time to adjust.

I grabbed her ankles once more and kissed one then the other, causing Emma to give me a surprised smile.

“Ready?” I asked, my voice so low and scratchy I wasn’t sure Emma could even understand me.

She gave a small nod, anticipation filling her face. I sank all the way into her slowly, giving her more time to adjust to my size. She winced, still tight. She closed her eyes briefly, and I waited for her to be comfortable for me to move, even if it killed me. I wanted nothing more than to slam into her, to let my body take control and override my mind.

Emma opened her eyes and gave a small nod. I didn’t need more encouragement. I pulled all the way out and moved back in. Soon, I established a slow rhythm that had Emma panting, her fingers pressing against my chest. Our bodies molded together, and it was so fucking easy. I wished everything was as easy.

Afterward, Emma and I lay beside each other in bed. Her head rested on my outstretched arm, and she was angled toward me. Her gaze was distant, thoughtful.

I knew I hadn’t convinced her with my bullshit explanation for my second phone. And my sex distraction wouldn’t work for long. Fuck. I should have been more careful, but I had allowed myself to really feel at home and hadn’t been as vigilant. That was the problem with letting your guard down, especially if you had secrets like I did.

Emma’s gaze focused on me, but she didn’t say anything.

I hated lying to her. It was a shitty start to our marriage, but I couldn’t tell her about my contact with Fina. The fact remained that she was part of the Camorra through her marriage to Remo fucking Falcone, and I shouldn’t even consider talking to her. She’d chosen him, so it wasn’t too far-fetched to worry that she might manipulate me to gather intel on Outfit business. At least, that was what my charge would say. Fina and I had never talked about anything remotely related to business. I hardly even told her anything of importance from my private life, which was why our contact had grown less frequent over the years. She’d made her choice, and she couldn’t have both Remo and me. I’d come to terms with losing my twin. I hardly missed her anymore. Too much time had passed since we’d been close. More often than not, I regretted even trying to save her. Fuck, had I known she was getting cozy with her kidnapper, I wouldn’t have gone on that fucking suicide mission and gotten Arlo, Enea, and Domenico killed. Bitterness and guilt filled my chest like a thick plume of smoke. I untangled myself from Emma and sat up.

“What’s wrong?” Emma asked, confused. She had begun to doze off, but I had woken her with my sudden movement.

Fuck. I schooled my face into a neutral mask. “I forgot to answer an important email. I have the details on my desk. I’ll just head down there and get this done. You should try to sleep.”

Emma nodded slowly, but I could tell she was hesitant to believe me.

I covered her with the blanket and gave her a small smile, then pushed to my feet and put on pajama bottoms. After checking that her wheelchair was in her reach, I left the room, closing the door after me.

The moment I was outside in the corridor, anger and regret over my decisions from the past resurfaced. A voice in my head beckoned me to silence those voices with booze. It never worked for long, but even a short reprieve seemed like mercy right now. I hurried down the staircase and into my office, where I grabbed a new bottle of gin from the shelf and sank down on the sofa in front of the cold fireplace. I unscrewed the bottle, then took a long swig, leaned back, and closed my eyes. Memories from ten years ago took form before my eyes as they always did when I was in this kind of mood or when I slept.

I remembered each of my friends' faces shortly before we headed out on our rescue mission to Las Vegas. Their laughter, their trust in me, their confidence that together we could save my sister.

A bitter chuckle left my mouth, and I took an even longer swig, enjoying the burn and the way the alcohol numbed some of my emotions.

The words Domenico's mother had spoken shortly after his death crossed my mind.

"You sacrificed my boy for your traitorous whore of a sister. He could still be alive! And the man who murdered him? He gets to enjoy himself and your sister. He gets to taunt us with his existence, and you do nothing."

She was right. I had done nothing to avenge my friends after my sister ran off with Remo. Domenico's mother didn't even know that I'd secretly gone to Serafina's wedding to Remo. Only Dad and Dante knew. What they didn't know was that I was still in contact with Fina. Sometimes I wondered if Dad suspected it. He didn't mention it, though. I should have killed Remo that day and tried to kill as many of his brothers as possible before they executed me, but I hadn't even tried. Not from fear of dying. No, I had seen how much Fina loved that psycho, and I hadn't been able to hurt her.

I took another swig.

So many years had passed since then, and my view of that day had changed drastically over time. I should have killed Remo. It probably wouldn't have freed Fina of his hold, but it would have lifted some of the guilt from my shoulders and made this world a safer place.

Maybe I would one day get the chance again, though I doubted it. Dante hadn’t sent me on a mission into Camorra territory ever since, not even close, and I doubted he would any time soon. Maybe he knew that I might hesitate before killing Remo.

I took another swig. Now my continued contact with Fina threatened my marriage to Emma when it already posed a risk to my life.

Fuck. Maybe I needed to cut all ties and make the move I had been too weak to do for myself. I wanted this marriage to work out for Emma’s sake. I couldn’t change my mistakes from the past, but I could try not to ruin more lives with future mistakes.

I took an even bigger swig, then another until my body was too numb to feel.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When I woke in the middle of the night, Samuel wasn't in bed with me. I sat up and turned on the light. Blinking against the sudden brightness, I put on my nightgown which lay beside me and scooted to the edge, then slid into my wheelchair.

What if he'd lied? What if he was with F. right this very moment?

I shook my head and moved toward the elevator in the hallway, then let it take me downstairs. It was dark except for a sliver of light coming from Samuel's office at the end of the hallway branching off the entryway. I followed the light. The door was ajar, but it was silent behind it. Swallowing, I nudged the door with my hand, and it swung inward. I wheeled inside, then stopped when I spotted Samuel on the couch, his head tilted to the side, his expression softer than usual in sleep. It couldn't be comfortable for him to sleep like this. I moved closer and noticed the almost empty bottle of gin beside Samuel on the sofa. How much had he drunk? I got even closer, and the intense smell of alcohol hit me. Considering how deeply Samuel slept despite being a Made Man and trained to be vigilant, I feared he'd drunk most of the liquor tonight.

Why? Because I'd accused him of cheating? Because I was right? Samuel didn't strike me as someone who would let that bring him to his knees. But how well did I really know my husband?

His phone must have dropped to the floor. It lay beside his naked foot on the hardwood floor. It was his second phone. Supposedly his phone for unsavory characters. Keeping my eyes on Samuel, I bent forward, trying not to make a sound, and reached for the phone.

Should I really spy on him again after his reaction yesterday?

With my fingertips against the phone, I hesitated. Samuel wanted me to trust him, but his actions made it difficult. Why did he come down here to get drunk?

A battle raged inside me. I hated being like this, so distrusting. I wanted to believe Samuel. But his secrecy and all the words that our society had put in my head were messing with me. I hated it. My fingers curled around the phone when Samuel stirred. I jerked up, dropping the phone. Samuel leaped up, pulling his gun, his eyes harsh until they settled on me. I was frozen in shock.

Slowly, he sank back down and lowered his gun.

"Fuck, Emma, I could have hurt you. Why did you sneak up on me?" He put the gun back down where it had rested beside him on the sofa.

"I didn't have to be sneaky. You were completely out of it." My eyes darted to the bottle of gin on the sofa.

Samuel's expression hardened. "I sometimes have trouble sleeping, so I take sleeping pills."

My eyebrows rose. Maybe he had taken sleeping pills too, but the alcohol alone would probably have knocked him out. "Why didn't you come back to bed? I was worried."

"I'm not used to someone controlling my every step."

I swallowed and gave a terse nod. With a strained smile, I gripped my wheels and reversed. "You're right. I have no right to impose on you."

Anger and disappointment battled inside me. I had on occasion found Danilo asleep at his desk as well—never drunk, though—and he'd always appreciated it when I'd woken him so he could find restful sleep in his bed.

Samuel released a low breath, raking his fingers through his hair. "That came out harsher than intended."

He stood, then looked around until his eyes settled on his phone on the floor. He picked it up, then leveled his eyes on me with a hint of suspicion.

I held his gaze, not giving away anything.

“I’m coming to bed now.”

“If that’s what you want,” I said, still with that same tight smile, and left the room. Samuel appeared beside me as I waited for the elevator door to slide open. His fingers cupped my shoulder lightly as we entered together. I tilted my head up. He looked exhausted and still not one hundred percent himself. He was surprisingly steady on his feet, though. Maybe he hadn’t drunk as much as I thought. His eyes met mine. “I told you I’m not the catch everyone makes me out to be.”

I pursed my lips. “This could easily be rectified. Just don’t get angry when I’m worried about you.” *And tell me the truth about F.*

“You have no reason to worry, Emma. I’ve been a Made Man for many years. The shit I’ve done and seen has hardened me.”

I nodded, but I wasn’t convinced. Made Men thought they were immune to feelings, but I knew how good their masks were.

Samuel went to the bathroom while I stretched out in our bed. I could hear water running, followed by the electric toothbrush. When Samuel emerged, his hair was wet at the front, and he looked alert. He slipped under the covers. The scent of alcohol was almost entirely gone and replaced by the eucalyptus note of his toothpaste.

He put his head down on the cushion, staring up at the ceiling. He didn’t look tired at all. It was four in the morning, and I doubted his sleep had been sound before now, but I didn’t think he’d go back to sleep.

“You look wide awake.”

He chuckled. “I am.” His eyes searched my face. “You should try to sleep. I’ll stay here until you have fallen asleep if you want.”

I closed my eyes, but could tell that I was too agitated to sleep now. I sighed and opened my eyes again, finding Samuel’s gaze on me.

“Can’t sleep?”

I shook my head. “I’m an early riser. Not this early, but five o’clock in the summer, so it’s too late for my body to fall asleep again.”

“But we went to bed late,” Samuel reminded me, and my face heated, thinking of our encounter yesterday.

Samuel’s gaze traced my heated cheeks, his lips twitching.

“We could both get up. I’d love to swim a few lengths in the pool.”

Samuel sat up with a nod and raised his arms in a slow stretch over his head. My eyes trailed over his strong arms and muscled chest, feeling a familiar warmth settle in the depth of my core. I looked away and cleared my throat. “I think I’ll join you,” Samuel said. “It’ll banish the last of my tiredness.”

Samuel went ahead after changing into his swim trunks. I had to find my bikini first, but then followed him downstairs. The air outside was still cool as the sun hadn’t risen yet. Samuel had turned on the pool lights, letting the water appear a fluorescent turquoise.

“The pool is heated,” Samuel assured me as he came to my side.

“That’s good,” I said with a laugh, rubbing my arms.

“Would you like me to help you into the pool?” Samuel asked.

My first impulse was to say no. I could get into the water alone, but then I noticed his gaze on my chest, checking me out in the triangle bikini, and changed my mind. “Yes, I’d appreciate it.”

Samuel slid his hands under my legs and behind my back and easily lifted me. I gave him a small smile. He walked over to the part of the pool where stairs descended into the water. He carried me until I was engulfed by the warm water. It wasn’t body temperature or close, but it wasn’t too cold either. He released my legs, and I righted myself until I was in front of him with my hands on his shoulders. For a moment, I considered kissing him, but I knew where this would lead. And while I was eager to try out sex in the water someday, I didn’t want to resort to intimacy again, not to mention that I wasn’t sure if the neighbors would be able to see us.

Samuel’s expression made it clear he would have been up for more. I released him and allowed my body to float on my back, then began to crawl backward. Samuel watched me for a couple of moments before he began to swim his own laps butterfly style. We swam for a while until my teeth began to chatter. The outside temperature had risen, but the water still managed to lower my body temperature to an uncomfortable level.

I stopped and swam toward the edge. Samuel immediately did the same. I hoisted myself out of the water and perched on the rim. Samuel came my way and touched my knees as he straightened to his full height. The water only reached his pecs now. I didn’t feel his touch, but the sight of his strong hands on my skin still sent a flood of need through me.

“Would you like to go out for dinner tonight?”

Surprise widened my eyes. “A date?”

“A date.” He moved his hands higher and rubbed my thighs absentmindedly. “We’re married, so it’s time I take you out and show you my favorite place in my city.”

“Your city,” I said with a smile. His father still seemed fit, so I wondered when Samuel was supposed to take over.

“My father and I rule together even if he’s officially Underboss.”

“Where are we going tonight?”

I had to admit I was a bit nervous about going out in public so soon after our wedding. I wasn’t sure how well-trained the press was in Minneapolis, but people would definitely stare at us. Our marriage had made waves even in the outside world.

“It’s a small Italian restaurant. Renato’s grandparents own it. My family and I have eaten there often for as long as I can remember, and I used to play in the kitchen with Renato when we were young kids. That’s how our friendship developed.”

“He’s quite a character.”

Samuel chuckled. “He’s loyal and trustworthy.”

“I am too, you know?”

Samuel sighed. He lowered his hands from my legs and stepped back. “I have trust issues.”

Because of his sister? I had only heard the rumors of how she’d saved Remo Falcone from the Outfit, but only Danilo, Samuel, his dad, and Dante knew the full truth.

“It’s okay.” A hint of guilt filled me when I remembered how I’d wanted to check his phone again tonight.

“Would you like me to carry you out?” Samuel asked.

I shook my head. “Can you give me a towel?” Samuel got out of the pool and took one of the fluffy towels that rested on one of the sunchairs. He draped it over my shoulders. Then he picked me up and put me down on the sunchair. I peered up at him, and he surprised me with a heated kiss. He pulled back after a moment with a tight smile. “I shouldn’t start something I can’t finish.” He looked at his watch, then sighed.

I blew out a little breath, trying to gather my wits about me. I glanced up at the surrounding houses. The pool was mostly hidden from view by

hedgerows, but I still worried about people catching a glimpse of us.

Samuel positioned himself in front of me. “Nobody can see anything now.”

I opened my bikini top and tugged it away, then dropped it beside me on the lounge chair. Samuel’s eyes practically devoured me as my nipples hardened even more in the light wind. I leaned back and tugged my bottoms down so I could really dry myself.

“Fuck, Emma. I really wish I had more time.” His voice sent a shiver down my back. He shoved down his swim trunks, revealing his erection. I was at eye level with it, and I could have leaned forward and taken him in my mouth. My face heated. Where had that thought come from?

Samuel grabbed the towel and wrapped it around his waist. I cleared my throat and wrapped my own towel tighter around my body. It was funny that I had thought the physical aspect would be a problem in our marriage. That obviously wasn’t going to be the case. Building trust and an emotional base would be much harder.

Renato and I stepped into the newest whorehouse of the Outfit. It was our most sophisticated with whores that were referred to as models and who looked like they might actually be one, at least in catalogs or ads, not the Paris Fashion Week.

Renato motioned around. “What do you think?”

Half-moon-shaped dark green leather booths offered privacy thanks to the satin curtains that could be closed completely. In alcoves over the booths, fake Roman statues added to the exclusive appearance. Dark wood panels covered the front of the bar and the lower part of the walls, with golden wallpaper on the upper part.

A door behind the bar opened, and a tall woman with red hair in a purple jumpsuit stepped out. She was in her early forties and was responsible for picking out girls for Renato's whorehouses. He owned five in total and had been managing them as Captain under my rule since his father had stepped back from managing the brothels after a stroke.

She strode purposely over to us, and Renato's mouth pulled into a leer. I released a sigh.

"Samuel," Autumn said with a charming smile before she turned to Renato and allowed her smile to become more sultry. She leaned forward and pressed a lingering kiss to his cheek, leaving a lipstick stain on his skin. Those two had been fuck buddies since Autumn made Renato a man thirteen years ago. He had a strange bond with her, even if he fucked other women all the time.

"Samuel wants a tour so he can approve of this project," Renato said, pride ringing in his voice. Autumn touched his shoulder. "Everything's ready. I picked three more models. I'm sure you'll approve."

"Lead the way," I told her.

She moved ahead, swaying her hips. Renato smirked, then we followed her into the backstage area where the "models" could serve their customers whatever they wanted. At the very end of the long hallway was the lounge room where the women could change clothes and put on makeup. When we stepped inside, twenty-five women turned their heads toward us. Most were in their early twenties, and only a few were in their thirties. There was something for every appetite.

I assumed they were only dressed in skimpy underwear so I could evaluate them. Though, that was really Renato's job. He tested every whore before she started working for him.

Autumn moved past the women as if she owned the place herself, then pointed at the last three women. "These are our newest additions. Would you like to test them now, Renato?"

Renato scanned the busty dark-skinned woman, then a petite Asian woman, and a tall blond woman. “What about you, Samuel? Would you like to test any of these ladies? Their talents are extraordinary.”

I sent him a scowl that shut him up. “I’m sure our customers will appreciate it.”

Renato shrugged.

I turned on my heel and left.

Renato followed me and stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. “So you are adamant about the fidelity thing?”

I glowered at him. “I am. Considering your father will hand over the Captain title to your brother if you aren’t married before your thirtieth birthday, you should consider the *fidelity thing* too.”

Renato’s expression darkened briefly. “I’ve thought about it.”

I cocked an eyebrow. Renato has been fucking so many whores and other women over the years, he was notorious even in our circles. I certainly hadn’t lived like a monk, but I’d never reached the level of manwhorehood that Renato had. It had caused him trouble finding a wife.

“My father won’t budge. He insists I marry someone from a conservative family.”

“I thought none of them wanted to give you their daughters.”

Renato shrugged. “Not from Minneapolis and not from Chicago, but I might have found someone.”

“Who?”

“Apparently, Giorgia’s family is very pious and strictly Catholic, as conservative as they come.”

“No, Renato. What are you up to now?”

“Let’s just say I made a deal with Giorgia Farina, and she’s willing to become my wife. Now I just need you to put in a good word for me with her brother and mother.”

I closed my eyes. “She’s Emma’s best friend.”

“That’s good for Emma, right?”

“I don’t know. Not if Giorgia cries her eyes out over your manwhore ways every day.”

“It’s a marriage of convenience. Giorgia knows what the deal entails.”

“All right. But if I find out you lied to the girl and pretended to be in love, I’ll kick your stupid ass.”

“Deal.” Renato clapped my shoulder.

I released another sigh.

Autumn appeared in the doorway. “Are you going to test them out now?”

“Of course. You know me. I take my job very seriously.” He sent me a grin. “You sure you don’t want a good cock suck?”

I definitely wanted my cock sucked, but not by one of these women. Since Emma had been at eye level with my erection today, I could think of nothing but her beautiful lips around my dick.

“I’m taking Emma to dinner at La Cantina tonight.”

Renato searched my eyes. “Good for you. Have the gnocchi for me. I haven’t been there in a week. We need to have lunch there again.”

I nodded, then turned on my heel and headed to the bar where the barkeeper was testing different cocktails.

“Negroni,” I said.

He frowned, but his expression smoothed the moment he recognized my face. He gave a quick nod and began to mix the drink, then pushed it over to me. I took a sip, then nodded appreciatively. It was good. I emptied it, then had another before I pulled my car keys from my pocket and got up.

“I could call you a taxi.”

I sent the man a look that made him pale. “I advise you to keep your nose out of your customer’s business, but especially out of mine. I make the rules in this city.”

I strode away, pissed off.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Samuel

My mood had marginally improved when I entered our mansion. The moment I spotted Emma coming out of the elevator, my anger evaporated. She wore a copper silk dress with thin spaghetti straps and a plunging neckline. A high slit revealed her slender leg and black pumps. I shut the door and blew out a breath. “Wow.”

Emma blushed and gave me a happy smile. “I wasn’t sure what kind of place this was. Cantina sounded more rustic, and they don’t have a website, but I read a few reviews that it’s become the Italian restaurant of the city, so I wanted to be safe. Better overdressed than underdressed. Right?”

Nerves shone on her face.

I nodded and stalked toward her. “You look beautiful.”

“I was worried you had changed your mind.”

I glanced at my watch. I was fifteen minutes late. “I should have called. I’m not used to someone waiting for me.” My mother had stopped when I’d grown increasingly annoyed over the years.

“You’re here, and I’m excited.” She paused. “And nervous.”

I took her hand. “Why?”

“I know people will talk.”

“They always do. But they better get used to us making public appearances because I intend to show you off more often.”

Emma’s smile widened.

“Come on.”

During the ride to La Cantina, Renato tried to call me twice. When he tried a third time as I parked the car, I turned off the sound and shoved my phone into the inside pocket of my jacket.

“Why do you ignore him? Don’t you think it could be important?”

I glanced at Emma. “He probably only wants to know if I put in a good word for him with Giorgia’s brother yet.”

Emma’s mouth fell open. “He wants to marry her? Giorgia didn’t even like him.”

I chuckled. “Well, that may be, but apparently, they struck a deal.”

Emma shook her head. “Why?”

“I don’t know why Giorgia wants to marry Renato, but he needs a bride from a conservative family by the time he turns thirty, or he’ll lose his position as Captain.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Arranged marriages are like business deals.”

My engagement to Emma had been. A quid pro quo that Emma wouldn’t be fond of if she found out.

Emma bit her lip and nodded slowly. “Will you put in a good word for him?”

“I will.”

“Will he be good to her?”

I looked out of the windshield. “Renato is my friend. He’s not violent toward women. But he won’t be faithful.” I spared her the details of his whore testing ways.

Emma looked down at her lap. “I’ll have to warn Giorgia.”

I nodded. “You should, but it seems they both need that marriage.” I motioned toward the restaurant. “We should go in.”

I just opened the door for Emma when a car pulled up with spinning tires. I pulled my gun but relaxed when I recognized Renato’s car. He got out of the car.

Emma was already inside, glancing over her shoulder at me in confusion as Renato's grandfather greeted her warmly.

I sent Renato a questioning look.

"Why don't you answer your fucking phone?" he shouted as he rushed toward me.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"I wanted to warn you—"

"Let me go. I won't be in the same place with him!"

I stiffened.

"Fuck," Renato murmured, his eyes locking on mine. My stomach constricted, guilt burning brightly, as I schooled my face into a hard mask.

"And I really hope you find happiness somewhere else because that man won't ever be happy if there's a God," Domenico's mother told Emma. "You should be ashamed that you parade around like this when my son is dead."

I moved inside. I stepped between Mrs. Accetta and Emma. I could bear her anger but I didn't want Emma to be on the receiving end of it. She had done nothing to deserve this.

Domenico's younger brother who was also a Made Man grabbed his mother's arm. "Mom, it's enough. This isn't the place."

"It's been years," Renato muttered.

"I lost my son! He was tortured to death because of him, because of his whore of a sister, and here he stands with his wife. My Domenico won't ever marry. He won't have children."

Her haunted eyes met mine, and I knew what would come before she even said anything. "That's why you married her, because *He* won't allow you to have kids either."

"Leave," I ordered, my voice cold as ice.

Renato and Domenico's brother led Mrs. Accetta out of the restaurant. Domenico's brother stopped in front of me. He had Domenico's light brown eyes. Eyes I saw twisted in agony in many of my nightmares. "I apologize for my mother, Samuel."

I gave a terse nod, and he left. Emma's face was ashen as she looked up at me. I could feel the eyes of every guest in the restaurant on us. Most of them were from our world and knew or thought they knew what had

happened. For them, it was old news. Made Men died all the time, but they were eager to see how I'd react, how Emma would react.

I sent them the coldest look I was capable of and many averted their eyes. Then my gaze settled on Emma. She swallowed hard. I touched her shoulder. "Come. Our table is over there."

Surprise filled her eyes, but she nodded and moved toward the table with a view of another one of the city's lakes. It was the best table in the restaurant and had been decorated with a vase with roses and candles.

I pushed Emma's wheelchair close to the table, then took my seat across from her. A hush had fallen over the restaurant, but I knew people were whispering about what happened and throwing us discreet looks.

"I'm very sorry," Renato's grandfather said as he handed us the menus. "I tried to warn you through Renato."

"Don't worry. I can handle it," I said firmly. I wouldn't show how much the encounter had shaken me. Fuck. I doubted it wouldn't ever not kill me inside to see Domenico's mother and her heartbreak. But today, she attacked Emma as well, and I couldn't allow that. He nodded, gave Emma another warm smile, then left.

I looked down at the menu even though I knew it by heart. I lifted my gaze when I felt Emma's eyes on me.

"We could leave if you want, you know?"

I kept my face neutral. "No, it would look like weakness. But we can just have two courses if you prefer to leave quickly."

Emma slowly shook her head. "It's okay. I can handle it. I'm used to people's attention, and their judgment. Not quite this aggressive but still."

"She shouldn't have attacked you. It's my fault her son's dead. You are innocent. You didn't even have a choice to marry me."

Emma moved her hand across the table, then froze, uncertainty filling her eyes. Public displays of affection weren't something I or anyone from my family were known for, but I put my hand on hers and left it there. People could know that she was mine and that I had no trouble showing it. Emma's eyes softened. "If you ever want to talk…"

I cleared my throat and looked back down at the menu. "The gnocchi al tartufo and the spaghetti al nero de seppie are particularly good, but everything is delicious."

“I’ll have the spaghetti then and the scaloppine afterward. I’d really love a dessert too.”

“Take whatever you like.”

I ordered two glasses of prosecco to start and a bottle of white wine to go with the *primi*. Emma and I clinked glasses. Emma took two small sips while I emptied half the glass. “I’m not used to drinking much so I don’t know how much of the wine I’ll actually drink.”

“Don’t worry. I can hold my liquor.”

I was still a bit shaken over the confrontation, but after I’d drank my prosecco, I felt more relaxed. Of course, I still noticed the curious glances being cast our way. I had been prepared for those, but I hadn’t expected an incident from Samuel’s past to be the reason for it. I had been a child when Samuel had tried to save his sister. Domenico must have been with him and had lost his life cruelly. If he’d died because of torture at the hands of the Falcones, it must have been horrible. Had Samuel witnessed his death? Had he been tortured too?

I could tell from Samuel’s closed-off face and from the polite dinner conversation about food and the sights of Minneapolis that he upheld that he wasn’t willing to share anything. Definitely not here under the watchful eyes of so many people.

When we headed back to Samuel's car after dinner, I felt unease at the idea of Samuel driving us home. He'd drunk a lot. But I couldn't drive myself. "We could ask Leo to pick us up," I said carefully.

Samuel shook his head. "I didn't drink that much. I don't feel intoxicated."

He opened the passenger door for me. For him, the topic was obviously over. I knew Made Men drank and drove, but since my accident, I definitely was very aware when someone did it. I didn't remember anything from the accident, or maybe my reaction would have been even stronger. Still, my heart rate picked up as I slid into the car and waited for Samuel to put my wheelchair in the trunk before he slid in beside me.

My pulse didn't stop racing during the ride home, but I remained silent, not wanting to get into a fight with Samuel at this early stage of our marriage. I could tell this topic would make him angry if I confronted him more insistently. Nothing happened, but I was still relieved when we arrived at our mansion.

"I told you I'm not drunk," Samuel said with a hint of annoyance before he got out of the car. He must have sensed my tension throughout the ride.

When he opened my door for me, I quickly gripped the handle of my wheelchair before Samuel could lift me and hoisted myself into it. I was too agitated. We walked up the ramp side by side, and I was trying to choose my words carefully, which proved very difficult. "I'm not sure it's a good thing that you're not drunk, considering how much you drank." A glass of prosecco, a bottle of white wine, a glass of red, and a digestif.

His walk became stiffer, and his face closed off as he opened the front door for me. "You are my wife, not my mother." His hard eyes met mine. "My word is law in our marriage, and you won't tell me what to do. You won't doubt my decisions, especially not in front of others, understood?"

I flinched as if he'd slapped me. Of course, I knew he held the reins in our marriage by tradition but for him to voice it like *that*. "Understood."

Before we'd left for the restaurant, I'd been eager to return home and be intimate with Samuel. Now? Not so much. The events of the evening had been unsettling in so many ways, and his words now simply were my tipping point. Nevertheless, I forced my voice to calm. "Would you mind if I tried to call Giorgia? I want to hear her take on the marriage to Renato."

Samuel removed his jacket and hung it up in the cloakroom, then he turned to me in his form-fitting white shirt and gun holster. “Go ahead. I’ll have to call Renato anyway.”

With a tight smile, I moved toward the living room while Samuel disappeared in the direction of his office.

I closed my eyes briefly. Maybe I shouldn’t take Samuel’s harsh words to heart. The incident in the restaurant had definitely shaken him, even if he refused to admit it. I didn’t want to nag, but Samuel didn’t talk to me, so I wasn’t sure what exactly was going on. I had seen the brief flash of pain in his eyes when Domenico’s mother had attacked him. If he still carried so much guilt over his friend after all these years, he must have gone through a lot.

I positioned my wheelchair in front of the panoramic window and glanced out at the lake as I called Giorgia. It was already past ten, but unlike me, she was a night owl and spent at least an hour every night reading in bed.

“Emma! I tried to call you today, but you didn’t pick up.”

“Samuel and I had dinner at an Italian place so I had my phone on mute.”

“Date night? So things are going well?”

I pursed my lips. Were they going well? “It’s going better than anticipated, at least physically.” I blushed at the mention of our sex life.

Giorgia giggled. “You probably won’t share any details?”

“I won’t, and it’s not why I’m calling. Did you really agree to marry Renato? The guy who ogled your breasts like a Neanderthal during my wedding?”

Giorgia sighed. “I did.”

“Why?”

“Because my mother found a man for me in Italy who’s twenty-two years older than me and makes a toad look like a model.”

“Oh no, really?”

“She wants me to marry as soon as possible. It’s not like I’m the best catch, considering my family isn’t high ranking, and we’re not swimming in money.”

“But him?”

“He’s only nine years older than me, good-looking if you ignore his intolerable character, and he needs to marry soon.”

“He’s also a manwhore and won’t be faithful, according to Samuel.”

“I don’t care. I need to get out of marrying that old fool in Italy. And I’d be living close to you again.”

“That’s true. So you want Samuel to convince your brother?”

“My brother isn’t the problem. My mother is.”

“Samuel can be convincing.”

“Then let him work his charm.”

We talked for another hour before I finally ended the call. I went upstairs. As expected, Samuel wasn’t there. I changed into my nightgown, then climbed into bed and read a romance book Giorgia recommended. The heat level soon made me feel quite hot, and I put the book down. Should I go downstairs and check on Samuel?

Remembering his words about his command being law, I decided to stay where I was. I had a feeling if I pushed too hard right now, he would close himself off even more—if that was even possible.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I woke to an empty bed the next day. It was seven, later than my usual wake-up time, and the explanation why Samuel wasn't still in bed, but one look at his side made me doubt he had slept here at all. Maybe he had fallen asleep in his office again.

Sighing, I got ready for the day. I hadn't heard from Ines yet about the self-help group for Made Men, so I decided to spend the day shopping. Samuel's comment about my shoes still hung in my head, and maybe a little out of spite, I had every intention of buying a couple more heels for my collection. I hadn't chatted with Anna since the wedding, so maybe I'd use my shopping spree to send her a couple of pictures of my planned purchases and ask for her professional advice. She was the Outfit's fashionista after all.

Once I was dressed for the day, I moved downstairs and had breakfast then asked Leo to take me shopping. The moment I reached the car, Leo appeared beside me and held the door open. His expression burst with uncertainty. "Should I help you?" He gestured from me to the back seat.

I smiled. “No, thank you.” I moved my wheelchair even closer to the car until it touched the side of the car. Danilo’s car had quite a few scratches because of this. I engaged the brakes and grabbed the armrest of the door and the seat, then used my legs to push me out of my wheelchair and slide into the back seat.

I disengaged the brakes and gave Leo instructions on how to fold my wheelchair before I closed the door and waited for him to get into the car as well. I could tell that Leo was still unsure how and if he was supposed to assist me, but I knew that was only temporary until we found a routine.

Luckily, Leo knew the best places from his years as Sofia’s and Ines’s bodyguard. I felt strange spending the day shopping like a trophy wife. I’d never considered myself one, but today, I definitely acted like one. Leo remained my shadow throughout the day and had lunch with me in a small restaurant that belonged to an Outfit member so he regarded it as safe.

On our way back home to the mansion, I finally decided to give the dance studio a call and ask for a tryout session. I was giddy and nervous when I hung up. It had been a long time since I had dance lessons.

Leo gave me a worried look through the rearview mirror. “Is this Outfit-owned?”

I frowned. I doubted the Outfit had any dance studios. “I reckon the only dance studios the Outfit would maintain are for *exotic* dance.”

He burst out laughing but sobered quickly. “Naturally, but if this isn’t Outfit-owned, you need your husband’s permission.”

I bit my lip. It wasn’t new that I needed to ask for permission. Danilo had kept a very close eye on me, but Samuel switched between hot and cold so quickly that I wasn’t sure how much of my daily life he really wanted to be involved in.

“You are right,” I said quietly.

Leo returned to the staff room, and I decided to take a dip in the pool as it was a particularly warm summer day. After changing into my bikini and a bathrobe, I wheeled outside. Steps rang out, and Leo showed up on the terrace. I raised my eyebrows.

“Samuel made it very clear that I should be by your side the moment you are outside.”

I glanced around. Of course, even being in a garden posed the risk of someone shooting you, but I couldn’t see how Leo could stop a bullet from

hitting me. I had no intention of living my life in fear. I had survived to *live*.

"Then maybe a spot in the shade would be good, considering your suit," I said with a smile as I moved toward the pool. Leo didn't move into the shade nor did he sit. He followed me but didn't hover too closely.

I arrested the brakes and shrugged out of my bathrobe so it bunched around my waist.

Leo's eyes took in my triangle bikini top and exposed belly, and he immediately turned his back to me. I pressed my lips together to hold in laughter.

"I apologize."

I sighed. "There's nothing to apologize for. I'm in swimwear."

"It's like underwear. It's not something I should see without prior approval of your husband."

I didn't say anything else. My words wouldn't convince Leo. As Samuel had said, his word was law, not just in our marriage. I set my feet down on the white stone and pushed out of the wheelchair but steadied myself on the handle in the back. Leo turned and made a move as if to come to my side. I raised my free hand, and he froze and looked away again.

I grabbed the railing that led down the stairs into the pool and slowly lowered myself into the water. Once I was fully immersed, I allowed myself to float. I loved the sensation.

Leo moved to the side and settled on a lounge chair. He checked our surroundings, very intent on ignoring me.

After over an hour of swimming and floating, I felt hungry. It must have been close to dinnertime by now, considering the way the sun hung low in the sky. I swam toward the ladder and began my slow ascend, my hands on the railing turning white from their grip. I was on the last step, about to put my foot onto the stone tile, but underestimated how slippery it would be, and I didn't have the necessary muscle tone to catch myself. Before I could fall back into the water, arms wrapped around my waist and lifted me safely onto the ground. "Thank you," I said, flustered. Leo's alert eyes met mine, then he released my waist like he was burned. He took my arm instead, but I was shaky on my feet, so he had no choice but to wrap an arm around my shoulders.

"I apologize for the touch," he said.

Steps sounded, and Samuel appeared on the terrace, dressed in suit pants and a white shirt. His eyes narrowed on Leo. “I advise you to reevaluate your hand placement.”

Leo looked pained. “I have to steady her.”

Samuel was at our side and took my bodyguard’s place. He immediately lifted me into his arms, which meant his clothes were soaked completely, but he didn’t seem to mind. He regarded Leo intensely.

“She fell,” Leo said.

“You protected her. I just want to make sure you use moments like this not for accidental improper touches that would result in a very unpleasant reaction on my part.”

“I won’t.”

It took every ounce of control I had not to say something, but if I undermined Samuel’s power in front of his soldier, he would be angry. “I’ll take over now.”

Leo gave me a small nod, then strode away.

Samuel’s gaze finally settled on me. “Are you okay?”

“I stumbled but didn’t fall. Leo caught me before I could make impact. I’m fine. He did his job.”

“He didn’t act in a way that made you uncomfortable?”

“No. He touched me as little as possible, but he had to steady me. He avoided looking anywhere near me once he saw I was only in a bikini. He was very careful not to risk your wrath.”

Samuel’s mouth twitched, obviously pleased with the level of control he had over his men. Then his gaze dipped to my body still in his hold. “It must have been difficult for him not to look. You look very beautiful in this little nothing.”

“It covers all the important places,” I argued. It wasn’t even a thong bikini like Anna wore on occasion.

“It covers the places only I have a right to see.”

I rolled my eyes. Then I registered the see-through state of his shirt. “You ruined your clothes.”

“We should dry you.” He carried me over to the towel cabinet, set me down with one arm firmly around my back, and took a towel. He helped me wrap it around my body, then carried me back toward my wheelchair and set me down. He seemed in a better mood than last night, for which I was

glad. My belly rumbled. I let out an embarrassed laugh. “Swimming always makes me hungry.”

“Seeing you in your swimwear makes me hungry too.”

I swallowed at the implication. I still wasn’t used to this very sexually open side of Samuel. He had been so very restrained and distant up until our first time.

“Let’s grab dinner first. I don’t want you to starve.”

He took me into the dining room, then disappeared upstairs to change clothes. He returned in a very relaxed style for him. A white linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a beige chino, no belt. He sank down across from me. We always sat at the very end of the table so we were close while being able to look at each other’s face. It allowed for actual dinner conversation without having to scream over the long table.

Our cook served food the moment we had taken our seats. Tonight, it was racks of lamb with a salad of wild herbs and roasted carrots. The perfect food for a warm day. She left a bottle of red wine on the table for us. Samuel took the bottle and lifted it. “Would you like a glass?”

I quickly shook my head. I couldn’t drink every day. Samuel poured himself a generous glass. We ate in silence for a while, mainly because I was so hungry and needed to sate my first hunger, not to mention that the lamb melted on your tongue. Eventually, Samuel leaned back in his chair, took a gulp from his wine as he regarded me. “Leo mentioned you made an appointment at a dance studio.”

Anger burst through me. So he wasn’t only listening to my calls but he also reported to Samuel before I could tell him?

“His duty is to me, Emma. There’s no reason to be angry with him.”

I put down my cutlery. “So you suggest I should be angry with you for spying on me.”

Remembering how I’d checked his phone, warmth crept into my cheeks, but I held my head high, too stubborn to back down. Samuel’s cool blue eyes held mine without a flicker of remorse in them. His gaze was unrelenting and dominant. It was a struggle to hold it. Eventually, I dropped my gaze under the pretense of grabbing my glass to drink. I doubted I fooled Samuel.

When I looked up, his expression was pleased. “Why do you want to go to that dance studio?”

“To dance. I would like to dance again. It’s as simple as that.”

Samuel tilted his head, obviously curious.

“It’s a studio that specializes in integrative dance.”

“It is not Outfit-owned, nor do they pay us for protection.”

I huffed. “It’s a dance studio. I doubt there are many under your protection.”

“None, unless you count pole dancing.”

I shook my head in exasperation. “Leo can accompany me there like he does everywhere else.”

“Will you dance with male partners?”

“That depends. Maybe. But of course, I can’t do the same moves as someone without a wheelchair would, so not everything is possible.”

Samuel gave a shake of his head. “I don’t like the idea of you being surrounded by people who aren’t part of our world. They don’t share our values, nor do they know the consequences of breaking them.”

“Leo will be there, and even most Outsiders will be very aware of who you are.”

“I’m a businessman with a net worth of many millions.”

“Yeah. Nobody believes that.”

Samuel shrugged. “I don’t want you to do any sports or anything really outside of our world.”

“But—”

“Emma, I made my decision, and you will obey.”

Tears of anger sprang into my eyes. I had been looking forward to this and he was taking it from me because he wanted to stay in utter control. I pushed back from the table. “I’m not hungry anymore. If you’ll excuse me.” I left before he could say something. I didn’t care if I shouldn’t act like this so shortly into our marriage. He made me utterly furious. There were enough restrictions in my life as a disabled woman in our world. Why did he have to put more on me?

I got ready for bed even though it wasn’t that late yet, but I’d simply had enough of the day. I perched on the edge when Samuel entered. His gaze settled on me. He looked angry. He stalked toward me and towered over me. I jutted my chin out and stared at him. He bent down and cupped my head, his lips crashing down on mine as he pressed me back into the mattress with his body. I was utterly stunned by his actions but kissed him

back as his tongue plunged into my mouth. He pulled back slightly, his blond brows in a deep frown. “I don’t think I like your temper.”

He kissed me again before I had a chance to say anything in return. His kiss robbed me of my ability to think, but I was still hurt and angry. I didn’t want him to think I would just tolerate it all. His hand slid down my waist and under my nightgown. I brought my palms against his shoulders and pressed as hard as I could, and tore my lips from his. “No, stop. I don’t want this.”

His fingers had reached my panties by now. His hungry gaze hit me. “Your body speaks a different language.”

I glared. “I guess then it’s for you to decide whether my spoken no is worth honoring or if your will rules in every regard in our marriage.”

Samuel glowered at me. He pulled his hand away from my panties and shoved to his feet. His erection tented his pants. My body still longed for his touch, but I wanted to send a message even if I deprived myself too. “Your no always trumps everything.” He turned on his heel and stalked out of the bedroom, closing the door with more force than necessary.

I closed my eyes, trying to calm my racing heart. My panties clung to me with arousal. After I had discarded them, I returned to bed again. I had little hope for sleep, though.

Samuel didn’t come to bed that night, nor the following three nights. Our conversations during dinner were polite but distant. I ached for him and more closeness again. He had dark shadows under his eyes, obviously not getting much sleep in his office, and I also feared he drank more than he should. I wasn’t sure how to address his drinking habits without another major fight.

I waited for him in bed the fifth night in a row, finally deciding I had to be the one who made the first move. Samuel was obviously too stubborn and proud, and maybe he was just content living in solitude, but I could not.

He didn’t like to be mothered, but he was obviously not taking care of himself. After a few more minutes of deliberation, I moved downstairs. Light flooded into the corridor from Samuel’s office. The door was wide open. Maybe this was a sign? Maybe Samuel wanted me to seek him out?

I moved into the doorway and spotted Samuel on the sofa in front of the fireplace, a glass of dark alcohol in his hand. On the fireplace, two photographs were propped up like a memento: one of him and his twin.

They were teenagers and looked remarkably alike, though he was a head taller than her already. The other showed him with four young men. I only recognized Renato, but I had a feeling I knew who the three others were.

The flames played on his face and accentuated the darkness that had obviously taken hold of him. I hated to see him brooding in front of the fireplace, sinking deeper and deeper into the past and the mistakes he blamed himself for. Would he allow me to help him? I wanted to console him. I didn't have much hope that he would open up to me today. That would take time, but maybe he'd allow me to make him feel better. I knew how tightly the shadows from the past could hold on to you, but I had freed myself—mostly—of them. The past still held Samuel in its relentless grip. I had to show him that I was his future, and we could shape it in a way that overpowered any darkness that the past held.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Samuel

I heard the soft squeal of the wheelchair tires before Emma appeared in the doorway, shrouded in shadows. She was already in her nightgown. Her slim calves and elegant bare feet poked out despite the chill in the house.

She worried her lower lip as she watched me silently for a minute.

She wheeled over to me. I wished she would stop trying to drag me out from behind the walls I'd built, but I could see she wanted to try. She didn't need my worries on top of her own.

I glanced away. "You should go to bed. It's late."

I had avoided her for the past few days. Part of it to make it easier on me resisting her. My body called for her closeness. The other was my stubborn streak. I regretted my decision to forbid Emma from taking dance lessons, but admitting to it wasn't easy.

"Won't you join me?" she asked in her clear, gentle voice. "I've missed you these past few nights."

Her vulnerable admittance surprised me. After she'd pushed me away, I had thought she would prefer a little distance too. I knew she was eager for

my touch, had been that day too, but my father had been very clear in regard to certain lines even men with our power shouldn't cross.

"I can't sleep. I'll return to work once I'm done with my drink." Or rather my drinks. On nights like this one, Scotch was never enough. While Dante steered the Outfit toward more political involvement in Chicago, the overall mood in my city was to stick to our traditions even more than ever. The Traditionalists were growing stronger again, asking to make bloody statements that would put the Bratva and our other enemies in place. Father and I needed to decide whether we'd do that in Minneapolis and possibly risk the death of more soldiers for a limited time. I knew the pressure on Danilo and Cincinatti was even higher, considering their territories bordered Famiglia territory. Nights like this had become the standard. Would a harder line condemn more young men to their deaths? My gaze found the photo of Domenico, Arlo, and Enea.

Emma followed my gaze. "I want to help you, Samuel."

I didn't react.

"I'm a good listener."

"I don't want to talk," I clipped.

Emma stopped right beside me. "Please let me help you, Samuel."

My fingers around the glass tightened. "You can't help me, so stop trying." My words were harsher than intended.

Emma didn't seem bothered by my tone. She simply nodded, but she still didn't leave. "Then let me take care of you."

I wasn't sure what she meant until she arrested the brakes of her wheelchair and set down her bare feet on the floor. Gripping my knees for support, she pushed forward, then slid to her knees before me. I sat up abruptly and grasped her frail wrists in one of mine to stop her hands from reaching for my zipper. "What are you doing?" I rasped. I'd dreamed about this, but I hadn't expected Emma to make the first move.

"I'm going to take care of you." Her fingers trembled slightly as she gripped my zipper. "Or don't you want me to?" The last part was said with a teasing smile that sent more blood down into my cock.

"I don't want you to," I said, but that wasn't true. The idea of Emma giving me a blow job had crossed my mind repeatedly.

She raised her eyebrows, detecting the lie. Emma could read me better than many others. Maybe it was a good thing in a marriage, but it also made

it harder to hide all the baggage I was carrying.

I shook my head with a sardonic smile, then I sighed. “I wasn’t sure you wanted it. Are you sure?”

She narrowed her eyes, and I could tell how angry my words made her, which surprised me. I thought she might be grateful for my consideration. I knew some women didn’t like giving head, and Emma was still very inexperienced.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I just want to treat my wife right.”

“If I want to go down on you and offer to do it, you can be certain that I’m sure.”

I settled back against the armchair.

Her nimble fingers did quick work of my fly, pulling it down, and then she freed my cock, which was already half erect from just seeing her kneeling before me. She curled her fingers around the base, squeezing hard so my cock twitched and filled with even more blood. She leaned forward, her lips parting, and then she took my tip into her mouth. I groaned at the feel of her heat enveloping me. She took her time sucking and licking my tip, her eyes closed. She was testing it out, and she was doing a good job. Her hot mouth and teasing tongue relaxed my tense muscles and banished some of the darkness that cloaked my thoughts.

I began bucking my hips lightly, and she got my clue and took more of me into her mouth. One of her hands began massaging my balls while she sucked me deeper and deeper into her mouth. I moaned and leaned back against the backrest. Despite the tiredness that beckoned me to close my eyes, I kept watching Emma. Sometimes she opened her eyes to follow her tongue tracing along my shaft. I could tell she enjoyed this, and fuck, that was an additional turn-on.

“Suck harder,” I growled when I felt myself getting closer to release and Emma didn’t hesitate. Soon my hands gripped the armrest tightly, and my hips thrust up in rhythm with her sucking.

“I’m coming,” I warned seconds before my balls tightened. Emma’s hold around my shaft tightened, and she took me deeply into her mouth, and then my orgasm slammed into me. My head fell back, and my eyes fell shut as I pumped upward, my balls twitching as I released into Emma’s mouth.

I basked in the sensations, the feel of Emma’s silky tongue and lips, her heat and fierce pounding of my heart reminding me I was still very much alive. My cock stopped twitching, but Emma kept sucking me. Fuck, this felt good. Slowly, she released me.

When I opened my eyes, Emma still clutched my now softening cock, and she licked her lips, then her eyes darted up to meet mine. Lust and embarrassment mingled in her brown eyes, a potent mix that set my blood on fire. Some of my cum had dribbled down her chin and slid down between the valley of her pretty tits.

I wanted to give back. I wanted to taste her. I wasn’t usually someone who gave oral. Not with the whores or my one-night stands. A long time ago with my affairs, I had given on occasion, but now with Emma, I was desperate to eat her out, to taste her pussy, to claim her with my tongue and mouth like my cock and fingers had done.

Emma searched my eyes. “Was that okay for you?”

I let out a hoarse laugh and leaned forward, gripping her chin and pressing a kiss to her swollen lips. “It was more than okay, Emma. It was exactly what I needed, but now it’s my turn to give you what you need.”

She flushed, desire flashing in her eyes. Yes, she wanted my mouth on her pussy as much as I’d needed to come in her mouth. I stood, allowing my pants to slide down. Emma looked at my half-erect cock and bit her lip, then darted her gaze up to me. I couldn’t wait to be buried between her legs.

Samuel picked me up and hoisted me into his armchair. I was completely surprised by his actions. His gaze holding mine, he slipped his hands below my nightgown and gripped the waistband of my panties. Slowly, he dragged them down. I stifled a gasp when the fabric came loose from where it stuck to my heated flesh.

My cheeks flushed when Samuel retrieved my drenched panties. His eyes took in their state and filled with a feral lust that increased the pounding between my legs. “I’m glad you enjoyed sucking me off.”

I had, but hearing him say it still drove heat into my cheeks. Enjoying sex, especially oral, wasn’t something that was part of our world’s programming of women. “I did,” I admitted, wanting to be honest. “And I want to do it again.”

A smirk ghosted over his face. “You will, Emma.”

His low growl made me ache for his touch in a torturous way.

As if he could sense my rising need, he pushed my legs apart and draped them over the armrests. He gripped the hem of my nightgown and exposed my dripping center. A new wave of embarrassment washed down on me, but I didn’t lower my gaze. I’d come to hate people averting their eyes, and I didn’t want to do it with my husband.

Samuel didn’t give me much time to be embarrassed. Without another word, he leaned forward, bowed his head over my heated flesh, and dragged his tongue from my opening to my clit.

My hips twitched, and my hands shot out to grip the armrest. Samuel gripped my outer thighs hard and pulled my ass closer to the edge before he pressed his mouth to my pussy and dipped his tongue into me. “Samuel,” I exclaimed. I was still a bit hesitant because of my state of arousal, wondering how it tasted for Samuel. He briefly let up, his eyes arresting mine.

“Trust me, Emma, I like everything about this. Your delicious taste.” He dragged his tongue ever so slowly over my opening. “The sounds coming from your mouth. Seeing proof of how much you got off on sucking my cock, and tasting how much you enjoy me eating you out. And now relax and let me lick that pussy like it deserves to be licked. I want you to come on my tongue.”

I was stunned by his words. So far, Samuel had been controlled and the silent, brooding type, even in bed. This new side of him was one I liked

very much. Very very much.

Samuel lowered his head, and his tongue dipped between my folds again, sliding back and forth, tracing my sensitive skin. I relaxed against the backrest and watched Samuel take care of me like I had taken care of him. Watching his mouth pressed against my pussy, his tongue nudging my button, and his pleased grin, I felt my arousal spike quickly. After a moment of hesitation, I pushed my fingers into his hair. His eyes briefly flitted up, meeting mine as the tip of his tongue circled my clit. He hummed and smirked as he teased me. The sight was too much, and my body began spasming even as I fought against it, not wanting the pleasure to end so soon. Samuel's smirk broadened. He cupped my clit with his tongue and upper lip, sending me over the edge. My butt arched off the seat, propelling my pussy harder against Samuel's mouth, who took up the invitation and sucked harder.

I cried out, my careful touch of his hair becoming a desperate tug that Samuel rewarded with another suck of my clit. I rested my head back against the headrest. Samuel raised his eyebrow. "Why do you look disappointed?"

I laughed, half embarrassed. "Not because of you. That was amazing." I flushed even more. "I just didn't want it to be over so soon."

Samuel stroked two fingers along my slit, gathering my juices. "Who said this was over?" He pushed into me slowly, making my lips fall open as my walls clenched around his fingers. He curled them deep inside me, making me arch up a little as my body became alive again. "It's not?" I asked with a teasing smile, my voice shaky.

"No," Samuel said in a voice so deep and dark, it seemed to come straight out of my most lustful fantasies. He pumped his fingers slowly. They glistened with my lust. His eyes on me, he leaned forward and dragged his tongue along my folds, joining his fingers in their magical work. The deep thrusts of his fingers and the gentle caress of his tongue sent flashes of lust through me. He was staying away from my clit. I knew I'd come apart the second he touched it. Maybe he did too because he kept pleasuring my opening with his fingers and tongue while his eyes pinned me with their intensity. When his tongue finally brushed over my throbbing clit, I exploded once more. My release dripped down my ass cheeks, and Samuel chased it with his tongue, which made me shudder even harder.

“Bed?” he asked. I merely nodded. I didn’t care where Samuel took me as long as we kept doing what we were doing. He picked me up and carried me into the lobby. His lips came down on mine again as he stumbled into the elevator with me in his arms. He briefly set me down to hit the up button but never ceased his assault on my lips.

Suddenly, Samuel hoisted me up, hooking my legs around his hips, and kissed me even harder. “Fuck, I can’t wait.” With my back pressed against the elevator wall, Samuel impaled me on his cock. I gasped from the shock of the invasion, from the fullness of having him so deeply buried inside me. My weight bearing down seemed to drive him even deeper into me, making me feel utterly full. His tongue dominated mine as his hips pistoled upward for another hard thrust. I clung to his shoulders, the back of my head bumping against the hard surface. The elevator arrived on the upper floor, but we didn’t step outside.

Every hard thrust made me feel alive and filled my body with a rush of pleasure that made me feel lightheaded.

Samuel cupped the back of my head, deepening our kiss even more, and, at the same time, protecting me from hitting the wall again, even if I’d hardly minded.

He drew away briefly. “Too hard?”

I buried my nails even deeper into his shoulders. If I could, I would have pressed my heels into his firm ass cheeks to keep him in place. “No, don’t stop.”

“Oh I won’t stop fucking you, Emma, but is it too hard?” He accentuated the last word with another, even harder thrust that made his pelvis slap deliciously against my clit.

“No. I need to come.”

“You will.”

We seemed to become one, our bodies entwined, as Samuel slammed into me with fierce passion. I pressed my face into his throat, still drained by my second orgasm but eager for another one.

Samuel’s thrust became so hard that my pussy throbbed from the vicious invasion, but I was so close.

Samuel pressed his lips against my ear as he shoved his cock even deeper into me, making me see stars. “I still taste your sweet pussy in my mouth. I want to lick you every day now, Emma.”

Hearing Samuel’s sexy drawl made my release wash over me. My pussy walls clamped down on Samuel’s cock, and after a few more hard thrusts, he came deep inside me. He straightened with me still pressed against him and strode out of the elevator.

After we showered together, Samuel and I found ourselves in bed. I was cuddled against him, my face pressed to his chest. Being close like this came so naturally, but I needed more than a connection of our bodies.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

My heart hammered in my chest as I tried to catch my breath. Sex with Emma would become better every time we did it. I could already tell. She was eager to learn, and I was willing to teach her. With her little surprise seduction, she'd pulled me out of a dark moment. I would probably have been drunk by now if Emma hadn't shown up and sucked me off.

Emma stroked my chest, making me relax into the mattress. She cast her eyes up, and I could tell she wanted to talk.

"Did something happen to make you want to look at those photos? Or is it still because of the mother's outburst in the restaurant?"

"It's happened many times before. I try to avoid crossing her path, but sometimes it's difficult. My father and I have to make certain decisions that might mean the death of more young men. They too could die cruelly like my friend Domenico if we decide to take a harder line."

Guilt squeezed my stomach as it always did when I talked about Domenico, his family, or any of my dead friends.

Emma tilted her head in consideration. "Why do you feel guilty for your friends' deaths?"

I wasn’t sure how much of the story she knew. I hadn’t talked to many people about what had happened. To Renato because I needed to, to Dante because I had to, to Dad because I wanted to. But the full enormity of that day, especially Dominico’s death, was locked in the deepest corners of my heart.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Maybe, but I want to hear it from you.”

“My best friends died because of me. I led them to their death. My plan was shitty. I should have known I couldn’t attack the Falcone mansion and get out alive. Not with only a handful of people. I would have needed an army, and even then, many people would have died, but I only had one thought: to save my sister. Nothing else mattered. I accepted the risk to my friends’ lives.”

“You wanted to save your twin, that’s understandable, and you asked your friends for help, which is understandable as well. Don’t you think they would have insisted on joining you even if you hadn’t asked them? They were your best friends after all.”

“Probably,” I admitted. “But I asked them and didn’t leave them a choice.”

“They could have said no, Samuel. They could have said they didn’t want to go against their Capo. That way they wouldn’t even have lost face by refusing your request.”

“None of them would have ever said no.”

“Would you have said no if one of them had asked you to save his sister from enemy territory?”

“Of course not,” I said. If Renato would ask me to save someone he cared about, I wouldn’t hesitate. And I wouldn’t have hesitated back then either.

“They knew what they were getting into. They were adults and Made Men. They weren’t ignorant of what it meant to attack the Falcone mansion. Even I know what an attack on the Falcones means. But they chose to risk it for you.”

My heart felt heavy. I still carried that sense of guilt with me. “And they died.”

I squeezed his hand. “Yes. Which was an outcome they had taken into consideration.”

I nodded. I stroked Emma's hair away from her back and traced a few scars on her back. "For me to forgive myself, I'd need their forgiveness first, but I can't get it. With every milestone I reach, I'm aware of the milestones they won't ever experience."

"They would have forgiven you eventually."

"What about you? Would you have forgiven the man who was responsible for the accident?"

Emma's brows puckered, but eventually, she nodded. "I have forgiven him."

I couldn't understand how she could be so forgiving. Maybe it came with being a Made Man, but forgiveness didn't cross my mind when I heard Emma's story.

"Because he paid the ultimate price?"

"Even if my family hadn't killed him, I would have eventually forgiven him. What he did was wrong, but he didn't mean to hurt me. Nothing of what happened was his intention. It happened. I didn't want his death, but nobody asked me. He was already dead when I woke from my coma. Danilo killed him before I could forgive him."

I doubted that was all that Danilo did, just kill him. Knowing him, he'd probably made him suffer before. I would have done the same if someone had hurt Sofia or Fina like that. Fuck, I wanted nothing more than to hurt Remo like that and then kill him.

"You lost a lot because he drank and drove," I said merely. Remembering how I'd drank and drove today, and how I'd even done the same with Emma in a car with me, I wondered how Emma had felt. While I hadn't felt intoxicated, I knew that accidents were more likely to happen.

"I lost something, yes, but my life isn't less because of it. It's different. And I would have wanted him to get punished, but I would have forgiven him if he'd asked for forgiveness." She paused. "But this is still different from your case. I didn't have a choice. I didn't even know he was drunk. But your friends went into the mission knowing the risks."

I knew Emma was right. Sometimes I got close to making peace with myself. Emma pushed herself up and kissed me lightly. "You should forgive yourself."

"I'll consider it," I said ironically.

“Maybe we can go to their graves together? If you share the burden of your guilt and grief, maybe it’ll be easier to let go.”

My first instinct was to say no. I preferred to be alone at their graves. Renato was the only person I could tolerate there on occasion. But I actually liked the idea of having Emma’s calming presence with me one day. Maybe not yet. We still weren’t there yet, but she was definitely a person who I could imagine allowing this. “I’ll consider it.”

Emma snuggled closer to me, and I could sense her contentment. She wanted to help me to defeat my demons, and she was happy that I finally allowed her to try.

I fell asleep in Samuel’s arms and didn’t wake until morning. When I did, Samuel was still in bed with me. I smiled and rolled closer to him. I was fairly sure Samuel would have spent the night in his office getting drunk if I hadn’t taken the initiative. It had taken all my courage, but I was pleased with the outcome. Not only had the sex been amazing but Samuel had finally opened up to me as well.

Fifteen minutes later, Samuel was under the shower, and I checked my messages. Ines had written late last night, letting me know that the priest had invited me to visit the community center where today’s meetings were held. I was excited about the prospect of finally helping Made Men who

struggled with their disabilities. It was rare for men like that to accept help at all.

I got out of bed, and after a moment of hesitation, I slipped into the bathroom. Samuel had left the door ajar, so I assumed he didn't mind me being in the bathroom while he showered. My eyes were drawn to the shower, where Samuel rinsed off the shower gel from his body. His eyes met mine as he washed his half-erect cock and abs. Swallowing, I moved to the sink and brushed my teeth. I was supposed to be at the community center by ten. That wouldn't happen if I got sidetracked by having sex with Samuel.

Samuel stepped out and wrapped a towel around his waist.

"I'm going to meet our priest today to discuss how I can help the Made Men with disabilities."

Samuel nodded, but I got a little distracted by the droplets of water rivuleting down his chest. "Leo will take you there. I bought a Mercedes Vito and had it modified so you can enter the back with your wheelchair. That way, you won't have to rely on him to help you into the car."

My eyes widened in surprise. "You did?"

He nodded as if this wasn't a big deal. "You like your independence, and this will make traveling by car far more comfortable for you."

"Thank you," I whispered, wheeling over to him and touching his hand on the counter.

He gave me a small smile.

"Regarding Leo… I'm not sure if his presence at the meetings will always be helpful. Some Made Men won't feel comfortable to share their struggles when he's around. They'll put up a tough front."

Samuel shook his head, his expression resolute. "I want him with you at all times, Emma. I need to know you're protected."

I nodded reluctantly. Samuel glanced at his watch. "I need to leave. There's a meeting with our Captains."

He pressed a quick kiss to my lips before he headed out.

I got dressed, then let Leo drive me to the community center, a small flat-roofed building beside the main Catholic church of the Outfit in the city.

Priest Agnellus waited in front of the building, easily recognizable by his cassock. He was bald but not as old as I'd suspected, maybe in his late

thirties. I wondered how he lived with the confessions of the Made Men. Leo opened the trunk for me so I could slide back out.

Priest Agnellus met me halfway and shook my hand. “Mrs. Mione, Geno and I are very honored about your interest in our project.”

“I think it’s very important to offer mental support to Made Men and their families who are affected by a disability.”

Leo trailed us as the priest led me up the ramp into the community center. In its center was a big round table with a dozen chairs around them. A TV screen was bolted to one wall with two wide sofas in front of it. Horse racing and a boxing match with the betting quotes showed on the screen, but the sound was off. A pool table and darts were additional entertainment.

“Bets are Geno’s and my sin,” Priest Agnellus said with an embarrassed laugh.

“Bets aren’t Geno’s only sin,” Leo said with a rough laugh. I slanted him a look, but he didn’t elaborate.

“I’m a Made Man, Leo. My sins are various,” a deep male voice said from the doorway to what I assumed was a kitchen, judging by the microwave and coffee maker I spotted behind him when I turned. He was a tall and broad man, perhaps in his late twenties. He looked a little rugged with a short beard and disheveled brown hair.

He came toward us with a thermos in one hand and four mugs dangling by their handles from his other. His gait was the slightest bit uneven as if one of his legs was shorter than the other. He set down everything on the table before he tilted his head in greeting. “Mrs. Mione. We’ve heard a lot about you.”

Leo gave him a harsh look, then pulled up a chair at the table and sat down. He obviously had no intention of giving us privacy. I didn’t want to discuss the matter in front of the two other men. Later, there would be time to ask him for a little distance.

“It’s Emma,” I said with a small smile up at Geno. “The same goes for you, Priest Agnellus. And I assume everything you heard was positive.” I made a face that clearly showed I knew that wasn’t the case.

Geno removed one of the chairs so I could slide closer to the table, and I did. “I don’t have to tell you how our world sees us.”

Geno sank down to my left but with a chair between us. Priest Agnellus took the seat across from us.

I wondered what exactly Geno's disability was, as it wasn't immediately apparent.

Geno pulled up his jeans leg, revealing a prosthesis up to his thigh. The knee prosthesis gleamed in the halogen lights above our heads, but the rest was black. "I got trapped under debris after the Camorra blew up one of our nightclubs five years ago. Lost a leg and hearing in my left ear."

"And you decided to help others with disabilities?" I asked.

Geno lifted a mug with a questioning expression.

"Yes, please."

He poured the steaming hot black coffee into my mug, then handed it to me. "For almost two years now. During the first three years, Priest Agnellus helped me."

"He's still a Made Man. Has been back to work for a year now."

Geno narrowed his eyes at Leo. "For eighteen months. But I was a Made Man before that too. All the men who we help are still Made Men, even if they aren't active. The only way to leave the Outfit is by death or betrayal."

Leo shrugged. "Of course."

I glanced between the two, sensing a certain dislike.

"What do you do for the Outfit?"

Geno regarded me carefully. "I'm one of your husband's and father-in-law's enforcers."

"Oh," I said, surprised that he showed kindness by helping other Made Men with disabilities but, at the same time, tortured people.

"You atone for your sins," the priest said.

Doubt filled Geno's face, but he didn't voice it.

"How do you usually help? And what can I do?"

"We have an open meeting twice a week. We also do house visits for those who don't feel well enough to venture out," Priest Agnellus said.

"How many come to the meetings?"

Geno took a sip from his coffee and shrugged. "The outcome depends. Sometimes we're only a handful. Sometimes almost two dozen."

"I'd love to be part of a meeting one day if the others don't mind."

“Actually,” Priest Agnellus looked caught as he exchanged a look with Geno.

“We have a meeting in fifteen minutes. We were hoping to attract many with your presence.”

Leo glowered. “You should have made me aware beforehand. More people means we need additional protection.”

Geno pulled back the leather jacket he was wearing, revealing two glocks. “I’m capable of defending her too, but I can assure you that the men coming here today have enough problems. They don’t need the prospect of a brutal death at Samuel’s hand.”

“Maybe they’re hoping for a bullet to the head from me to end their misery. Suicide is still sin,” Leo growled.

I slammed my hand on the table, surprising myself and the men beside me. My eyes were wide in shock over my outburst, but I narrowed them at Leo. “I appreciate your concern, but that was a very cruel thing to say. I can assure you my life isn’t miserable, and neither is theirs.”

“I’m sorry, but your situation is very different. Many Made Men don’t see themselves as men once they aren’t active,” Leo said, tilting his head in apology.

Geno leaned back in his chair with a dark look. “He’s right. The suicide rate for Made Men with grave disabilities is high. Nothing’s worse than being regarded as half a man or a burden.”

I pressed my lips together, trying to argue, but I knew he was only stating facts. “I hope I can change how some men see themselves.”

“I do too,” Geno said honestly. He nodded toward the front door. “Here comes one of them.”

Leo got up, causing Geno to let out an amused snort.

A tall teenage boy entered the center with a muscled man in his forties. They looked like father and son. My first instinct was to look at the older man, but his demeanor was too confident as if he thought this was a waste of time. My gaze settled on the tall, dark blond boy.

The father nudged the boy’s shoulder hard, so he looked up at him, then he spoke very slowly and clearly. “I won’t have time to pick you up. Take a taxi.” The boy gave a terse nod, then his eyes darted to us.

“Fiorentino, fifteen. Born deaf. His father is Captain.”

I had gathered that the boy was hard of hearing, but I wondered why the father didn't sign with him. Both strode toward me after the father gave a nod toward Leo.

"Mrs. Mione," the father said with a small bow of his head. "It's a pleasure to meet you." He nodded toward his son. "This is my son, Fiorentino. He can't hear."

I smiled at both of them, then began to sign to the boy. His eyes keenly followed my hands. He definitely knew how to read sign language. But he didn't reply, only glanced at his father. "I don't like it when he signs. It makes him look like an imbecile."

"That's a very rude name to call your son. It's just a form of communication."

He gave me a tight smile that made it clear he didn't agree.

"You can't sign?" I inquired after a moment of strained silence.

"No," he clipped. He glanced at his watch. "I need to leave." He leveled his gaze on his son. "Act as if you were a Made Man. Don't embarrass me."

The boy nodded again. He didn't relax until his father was outside.

"You aren't a Made Man yet?" I signed and said for Geno's and the priest's benefit.

The boy looked at Geno, who nodded.

"My father doesn't want me to become a Made Man because I'm not of value to the cause."

I frowned. "That's horrible."

"Fiorentino has five younger sisters, and his mother is pregnant with the sixth," Geno said.

"To produce an heir who can become Captain?"

Fiorentino nodded, his expression shut off. He regarded me with the hope that I could help him. But what could I possibly do? By now, more men were filing in, all of them older than Fiorentino, some old enough to be my grandfather. I greeted them all, and eventually, they settled on the chairs around the table or took a seat in front of the TV. Five men were wheelchair users. Others had lost their sight, their arms or hands, foot or leg, and one had obviously suffered a serious injury to his head judging by the scar that ran across his skull.

I talked to a few who seemed open to a conversation and eventually stopped by Fiorentino's side, who was talking to Geno. They weren't

signing, and I noticed that the boy had put in hearing aids. When I stopped beside them, they fell silent. “Should we sign, or would you like to continue like this?”

“I’m not very good at signing,” Geno said with an embarrassed smile.

“Oh. All right. Should I sign and talk?” I asked Fiorentino.

He shook his head. “Just talk. I can hear you if you don’t talk too quietly.”

“Why didn’t you wear the hearing aid before? You wouldn’t have to read your father’s lips if you did.”

“My father sees it as a sign of weakness. He doesn’t want me to wear it in public. He prefers me to be silent and invisible.”

I had to stifle a rude comment about his father. “Because your speech is slightly impaired?”

Fiorentino gave a tense nod.

“He should be proud of you,” I said finally.

“Fiorentino wants to become a Made Man,” Geno said.

“Have you talked to my husband or father-in-law?”

Fiorentino shook his head. “My father would see it as a betrayal. He doesn’t want me to become a Made Man because I can’t do anything.”

I scanned the boy. He was tall, and he looked fit.

“I taught him how to fight. I still do. His father is okay with that so he can protect himself.”

“I could talk to my husband. Is there anything you’re particularly good at?”

“I’m good with computers. Hacking, coding, security systems.”

“That sounds promising,” I said, then fixed him with a stern look. “Are you sure you want to become a Made Man? Right now, you’re free.”

Fiorentino’s expression turned fierce. “I want to be part of the Outfit, nothing else.”

“I’ll put in a good word for you.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Samuel

Emma seemed filled with a new purpose when I came home for dinner that night. Leo had told me how she'd spent the day, so I knew she'd spent three hours at the community center.

I went over to where she waited at the table for me and kissed her briefly before I took my seat across from her. She wore a flimsy top that revealed her slender shoulders and throat, and the enticing swell of her breasts. I wondered if she'd worn the same thing during the day.

Before I'd even said a word, she asked, "Do you know Fiorentino?"

I shook my head, racking my brain for that name. He definitely wasn't one of our men. "He's one of your Captain's sons. He's hard of hearing."

"He's the Greco heir."

"Not if you ask his father."

I sat back as our cook served us involtini and risotto, my favorite combination. I didn't have time to eat several courses every night.

"The boy isn't part of the Outfit."

"But he wants to be."

I could tell how agitated Emma was. Staying out of family business, unless the situation was extremely dire, was one of the top rules in our world.

“I know how you Made Men think about family business,” Emma muttered, and I couldn’t help but smirk.

“It’s serious. He could be very valuable for the Outfit. He is tall and strong. He can fight, Geno assured me.”

“Geno?” I asked quietly. Leo had mentioned that they’d talked a lot. I doubted Emma was someone who would cheat, but my trust issues were hard to overcome. The person I’d trusted most, my own twin, had betrayed me to save the man who’d kidnapped her and killed my friends. That wasn’t something you just moved on from.

“One of your—”

“Enforcers, I know who he is.” He’d shown admirable perseverance returning to his former position after his injury.

Emma pursed her lips, then continued. “He’s good with computers. He could help the Outfit with hacking and all that stuff.”

“Fiorentino, not Geno, I assume.”

“Yes,” she said, sounding exasperated. It was quite entertaining. “Why won’t you induct him?”

“His father asked us not to induct him.”

I remembered the conversation now. My father and I had talked to him without the son, and he’d assured us that his deafness would be too much of a risk for us and him.

“That doesn’t usually stop you, right? A boy born to a Made Man belongs to the Outfit. Or could I ask you not to induct a future son of ours?”

I regarded Emma curiously. We hadn’t broached the subject of kids yet, and I had no intention of discussing the topic now, nor did Emma from her look of regret over bringing it up. “Of course, our son will be part of the Outfit.”

“Then give Fiorentino the chance to be a Made Man, too.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her demanding voice, though it was more endearing than insulting.

“Please, Samuel. He can hear with hearing aids.”

“Not as well as someone with regular hearing, I assume.”

“Don’t tell me that the older Made Men still have amazing hearing after decades of gunshots and explosions.”

I chuckled. Emma had a point. “They don’t. What about speech? I won’t convince our soldiers to learn sign language.”

“He can talk without a problem.”

I nodded again. I had never met the boy. Maybe I’d passed him at social gatherings, but I had never paid much attention to him. I had simply taken his father’s word on the matter that he couldn’t become a Made Man. Dad too had never doubted it.

“If this was his father’s way to rob us of our rights, then I might have to punish him.”

Emma shook her head, shocked. “Trust me, he thinks his son is incapable. He sees him as a burden. That’s why he’s trying to produce another heir.”

“I’ll talk to my father, and we’ll invite Fiorentino to talk with us. I’ll have him evaluated that day. If he can prove himself, he’ll get his chance to become part of the Outfit.”

“Thank you so much.”

“I know of a way you can thank me,” I murmured over my glass of white wine.

Emma perked up, then flushed when she understood what I meant.

The phone in my pocket, my *second* phone, vibrated. I still hadn’t had the necessary willpower to cut Serafina off completely. Our contact had become less frequent over the years, but in the weeks prior to my wedding and ever since, Serafina had tried to rekindle our bond. She would have loved to be at the wedding.

But she had made her choice.

Feeling Emma’s eyes on me, I ignored the phone and finished our dinner.

Samuel slept soundly beside me. He'd had only one glass of wine during dinner, but I was sure he'd had more drinks afterward while in his office. I had already been asleep when he joined me. A nightmare had woken me, and a message popping up on his phone that illuminated the room had stopped me from falling back asleep right away. The room lit up with another message. It was past midnight. I carefully sat up, worried about waking Samuel. His two phones both sat on the nightstand, but it was his second phone, the one with F., that kept lighting up.

I couldn't make out who sent the messages. I craned my neck as another message popped up, this time with a photo that didn't show on the screen. My curiosity and suspicion were almost unbearable. I should trust Samuel, but our world rarely rewarded trust. I bit my lip. If I used my wheelchair to get to Samuel's side, he would definitely hear it, even if he was slightly drunk. I scooted a bit closer to him. Maybe I could reach over him? But if he caught me, he'd be furious.

I lay back down and tried to fall back asleep, but two more messages lit up the room. I sat back up and tried to lean over Samuel to reach his phone. If I could touch the screen, I'd see if the messages were from F. again. Another message illuminated the room.

Samuel stirred, his brows snatching together, face twisting with pain. "No."

He shook his head, his body twisted. He was having a nightmare. My gaze drifted between the phone and Samuel, and I touched his shoulder gently. He didn’t react until I shook him harder, then his eyes flew open a moment before his phone turned dark again and blackened my vision.

Of course, another message lit up our room shortly after, so Samuel’s disorientated expression came into view. He sat up, so I had to lean back. He reached for his phone and turned it over.

I swallowed. “You had a nightmare.”

“I have many nightmares,” Samuel murmured. He turned on the light, causing me to squeeze my eyes shut. He perched on the edge of the bed, his back to me. Scars covered his skin. I too had a few of them, but not as many as Samuel, and I couldn’t remember the incident that caused them, so my nightmares always revolved around the moment I woke up in the hospital, unable to speak.

“Do you want to talk about them?”

“No,” he clipped. He touched a scar on his side.

Hurt, I leaned back against the headboard. His gaze darted to the phone he’d turned over so I couldn’t see the incoming messages anymore.

“Go on, read your messages from F. I’m sure she has something important to share.”

Samuel slanted a cautious look over his shoulder. “Did you read them?”

So it really was a she. I was angry with myself for thinking that our promising sex life meant Samuel wouldn’t also seek out other women. Why did I believe his talk about fidelity?

“I did not,” I pressed out, close to tears.

Samuel regarded me closely, then shook his head. “I told you I’m faithful, Emma. This isn’t what you think it is.”

I raised my eyebrows. “It’s not? You’re chatting with a woman, and you keep it a secret from me. She’s even sending you photos, and I’m pretty sure they aren’t G-rated.”

Samuel reached for his phone and stared down at it. His body was shielding the screen from my view. “Here,” Samuel murmured and handed me the phone. I took it with shaking fingers, and with a feeling of trepidation, I looked down at the screen and the string of photos. I frowned, not understanding what I saw. It showed two dark-haired children in front of a huge birthday cake. I could only see their backs. The girl wore a tutu,

and the boy what looked like boxing shorts. And suddenly, it clicked. I looked up at my husband.

Samuel's shoulders sagged, and he shook his head with a look of resignation. "What I tell you now is betrayal. Not of you, but the Outfit. If word gets out, I'd be punished harshly."

My eyes grew wide. "My loyalty lies with you, not the Outfit."

Samuel twisted his head toward me and smiled bitterly. Then he sighed and nodded. "F is short for Fina. Serafina, my twin."

"Oh," I breathed, my suspicions being confirmed. The children in the photo must be the twins. Remo Falcone's twins. Now I knew why he thought it was betrayal. Why had I never thought about F being his sister? I hadn't known he called her Fina, but I could have made the connection if not for being so insecure because of gossip. It had seemed more logical for him to betray me than the Outfit. I was relieved but, at the same time, worried for him. Our Capo Dante was his uncle, but betrayal was difficult to tolerate.

"I thought you ended all contact when she went back to Remo Falcone." I glanced at another photo showing Fina's smiling face as she hugged the girl in the tutu.

"I should have," he murmured, pain and regret in his voice. "But she's my twin."

I couldn't even begin to understand what it meant to be connected to someone from the womb, so I didn't judge him.

"The twins had their sixth birthday a couple of weeks ago. Then there was our wedding. My sister tried to establish closer contact again, probably feeling nostalgic."

"You miss her," I said softly, touching his back.

"I miss the sister I had before Remo twisted her into someone else. She isn't that person anymore, and I'm not the same person I was before she was kidnapped."

Again he touched the scar on his side.

"Does it hurt?"

He dropped his hand. "No. I got it when Serafina was kidnapped. The memories of what followed hurt more."

It was the most personal thing Samuel had ever shared with me, and it made me feel even worse for accusing him of cheating. "I'm sorry for

accusing you of cheating. I just thought…”

I trailed off, not sure how to say it.

“You just thought?” he asked, his gaze boring into my eyes.

“You are a man, a man who had many lovers before our marriage.”

“I did,” Samuel admitted, turning around to me. “And I have no need for further conquests. What you said sounds like something your mother put in your head.”

“She probably did,” I muttered. I sighed, then narrowed my eyes. “So you say because you had so many girls before marriage, you can be faithful now. By that logic, I’d have to go look for a lover, considering my lack of experience.”

Samuel climbed back on the bed and cupped my face with a dominant smile. “This world doesn’t give girls the same freedoms as we get, and while this is certainly not a fair concept, I like that you are mine alone and will always only be mine.”

He kissed me. Soon, his kiss became more demanding, and we ended up having sex again. Afterward, I snuggled up to him with my cheek pressed to his strong chest. Samuel had no trouble allowing this kind of closeness. His fingers were even stroking my arm gently, making me feel cared for and very drowsy.

“I thought about your wish to dance.”

I held my breath.

“I think it’s a good idea. As long as Leo’s observations don’t give me reason to change my mind, I’ll allow you to take dance lessons.”

I pushed up and kissed his lips with a big smile. “Thank you!”

His eyes scanned my beaming face, and he brushed a strand away from my face. I kissed him lightly, then put my head back down and cuddled even closer to him. He wrapped an arm around me. “I feel safe in your arms,” I admitted in a small voice.

Samuel released a deep breath. “I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY

The following day, I helped with another meeting at the community center. The dance studio couldn't offer me a tryout session so quickly after I'd canceled my last, so I had to wait two more days.

During the meeting, I found out Samuel had indeed spoken with Fiorentino's father and made it clear they wanted his son to prove his worth.

Fiorentino beamed as he told me. "Tomorrow, Samuel and his father will oversee the first training of new initiates."

"What happens there?" I asked curiously.

Fiorentino seemed unsure of what to share, and maybe he didn't know everything, considering he wasn't yet inducted.

"There is fight training, knife fights, shootings, some questioning."

I frowned. "Questioning?"

"Some light torture. Nothing an initiate that's been brought up in our world can't withstand."

Fiorentino nodded. Was he prepared, considering his father had never meant for him to become a Made Man?

Geno sank down beside me on a chair, propping his elbows up on his legs. “His father had to harden him. Even if he didn’t become a Made Man, he needs to be able to keep the secrets he witnesses to protect his family.”

“Will you be doing the questioning?”

He nodded. “But not alone. Pietro and Samuel will definitely be involved.”

I swallowed, thinking of my husband and father-in-law torturing teenage boys.

“It’s hard to imagine,” I admitted.

Geno let out a dry laugh, his eyes holding mine with mirth in them. “Not for me. I only know the business side of your husband, so I can tell you he is very capable with a knife.”

How did that go hand in hand with Samuel’s guilt over his friend Domenico’s brutal death? It didn’t make sense, but many rules in the mafia didn’t.

Samuel strode in. Geno looked toward him, and his smile fell. He cleared his throat with a tense smile. “I should really go.”

“Oh sure,” I said, but he was already walking away.

Samuel stopped by my side, then bent down and kissed me firmly, his hand cupping my head possessively. I frowned at him. “Why did Geno run off so quickly when he saw you?”

Samuel’s expression hardened. “Because the look I sent him told him I didn’t like him getting cozy with you.”

“Samuel,” I whispered in embarrassment. “Why would you scare away the man who helps the same cause I want to help? This is important to me. What if he decides it’s better not to have me involved because I mean trouble?”

“He can’t decide that. And because,” Samuel drawled, his eyes boring into mine, “he was checking out my wife.”

A laugh bubbled out of me. “You’re serious?”

“I’m dead serious.”

I covered my eyes and giggled. Then I peered up at Samuel. He didn’t crack a smile. He still looked mad. Most men gave us a wide berth, which made me feel bad for the intrusion. “He wasn’t flirting with me. Why would he? He knows I’m yours.”

Samuel crouched down, holding the handle, bringing our faces close together. “Because you’re gorgeous and kind. You’re the woman right out of his wet dreams, I bet. And sometimes men forget themselves if they are surrounded by someone like that.”

I rolled my eyes.

Samuel’s expression hardened even more. “You should trust my judgment and experience on this. I’ve been around enough guys in heat.”

“Well, first of all, I have zero interest in other men. Second, he knows I’m married to his boss. He won’t do anything even if he’s attracted to me because he knows you’d punish him harshly.”

I was still convinced Samuel was simply over-the-top jealous and distrusting, which could be explained by his sister’s betrayal and his nature in general.

Samuel chuckled darkly. “Indeed.” Priest Agnello headed our way so my husband finally straightened and lost the possessive expression. “Samuel, it’s so good to see you. I miss seeing you and your father in church.”

Samuel gave him a tight smile. “I have spent too much time in church burying good soldiers and friends. My mother prays for my father and me. That’s the extent of my spirituality, I fear.”

Priest Agnellus sighed, but I could tell he knew better than to push. He looked down at me. “What about you?”

“I attended church in Indianapolis.” My mother insisted we do. “I’ll join you this Sunday.”

Samuel shook his head, and I was about to grow angry again. He couldn’t possibly have anything against me being in church? “I’m afraid you, Renato, and I will be flying to Indianapolis over the weekend to finalize a bond between him and your friend Giorgia.”

My eyes grew wide with surprise and happiness. I missed Indianapolis, not so much my mother, to my embarrassment, but definitely Giorgia and Danilo.

“Renato has found a wife?” Priest Agnello inquired, astonished. I really hoped Giorgia knew what she was getting into.

“It’s not final yet, but once I’ve talked to the mother and brother of the future bride, it will be,” Samuel said with a hard smile. But Indianapolis wasn’t his territory, and Danilo would make that very clear. I kept my

thoughts to myself. Samuel talked to most of the men who were still around after that before we set out home.

I waited until we were in Samuel's car before I voiced my thoughts. "Giorgia falls under Danilo's jurisdiction, so her mother and brother will listen to him, not you."

Samuel's mouth tightened. "That is true. But Danilo should have an interest in sending your best friend to Minneapolis."

He had a point. Danilo wouldn't care if Renato was good husband material for Giorgia.

"When are we leaving?"

"Friday afternoon."

I was relieved. That meant I could go to dance classes on Thursday.

"Geno told me that tomorrow you're testing the initiates before they're allowed to take the vow."

Samuel's brows snatched together, but his vigilant eyes stayed on the street. "He should be careful what he says."

"I'm your wife, so I'm allowed to know these things, right?"

Samuel parked the car in our garage, then turned to me. "If I keep information from you, it's not because I think you're not trustworthy. It's because I know you wouldn't be able to protect a secret under duress."

I pursed my lips. "I know pain."

Samuel looked at the scar peeking out on my neck. It was one of many, though most of them had faded to fine white lines. Mom had insisted I have the best laser therapy to reduce them. Samuel reached out for it and lightly traced it. "That's true. You have more experience with pain than most girls in our world. But submitting to torture is different. There's a psychological aspect to it that's almost as bad as the pain itself, the knowledge of being completely and utterly at someone's mercy."

I shuddered. Samuel nodded and left the car, then opened my door and lifted me out of the seat.

When we were at dinner that night, I finally broached the subject of tomorrow again. "Can I watch the initiation process tomorrow?"

I was really curious. I couldn't deny it.

Samuel gave a tight smile. "This is part of Outfit business, only Made Men and future initiates are allowed to be part of it."

"I understand."

Samuel put down his wineglass. Something on his face shifted to a heated look that tightened my belly with desire. “Since seeing Geno smile at you inappropriately, I have been thinking about nothing but staking my claim on you again.”

I blinked, then quickly glanced around to make sure our cook wasn’t around to clear up the dishes. I would have died of mortification.

Samuel chuckled and shoved to his feet, then came around the table toward me. I dabbed my mouth with a napkin, then leaned back in the chair with a teasing smile. “And how are you going to do that?”

Samuel picked me up and kissed me fiercely.

Emma was still asleep when I got up. For a moment, I looked down at her sleeping form. Her brown curls were all over the place, and her hand rested on my pillow, our wedding ring prominent on her slender finger.

Being married to Emma was easier than I thought. She definitely had a stubborn streak, but she wasn’t someone who played games or who tried to rile me up on purpose. She had her own interests and didn’t just wait all day for me to come home.

I turned and got dressed in my usual gray suit and white dress shirt. I’d change into gym clothes at the training center.

I picked up Father at home. He too was dressed in a suit but a dark one.

“Are you going to get your hands dirty today, or are you too old for that?” I taunted him.

He sent me a dark look. Dad was fifty-seven, but he didn’t look it. He worked out with me five times a week, and had lost the hint of a belly I’d teased him with for months. “Considering you are going to become Underboss soon and will be the one these new soldiers will answer to, you should be the one to question and test them. But I certainly won’t stand back and watch.”

“Do you really think you can retire soon?”

Dad looked at me with searching eyes. “If you don’t think you’re ready yet—”

“I am,” I said firmly. My demons would still haunt me in five, ten, or twenty years. “Or does Dante disagree?”

“You have been very efficient and proven your worth over the past few years. He won’t hold on to an incident from the past.”

“It wasn’t an incident. It was a betrayal of the Outfit that cost three of Dante’s soldiers their lives.”

Dad nodded. “Dante has his own skeletons in the closet.”

Dad had said it before but never explained it. Feeling my curious gaze on him, he leaned back with a deep sigh. “I might not always be there. As long as Dante is your Capo, you should have something in your hand.”

I parked in front of the square building that held our training center, then waited for Dad to continue. I was surprised by his words. Dante and Dad liked each other, and we had a good family bond, but of course, in our world, that didn’t mean you didn’t have to take certain precautions.

“Rocco Scuderi Senior, the traitorous bastard, had a brother. Jacopo.”

I had never heard of him. He had died long before I was initiated, I assumed.

“Dante killed him even though he was set to become his Consigliere.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Why? Did he try to betray the Outfit?”

“Oh no. He was loyal to the bone and as sadistic as they come.”

I gave my father a look. We too held a certain sadistic streak, or we couldn’t do what our work required. Dad shook his head. “You don’t understand. He was sadistic to women too, and your mother was promised to him.”

“Oh,” I said, suddenly understanding. “And Dante saved her from that fate.”

“He did, and he convinced his old man to give your mother to me.”

“But that means Dante’s betrayal saved Mom and helped you too.”

“It did. I’ll forever be grateful for what he did. But you are my child, and I’ll always make sure you are protected, so I think it might be wise for you to learn more about Dante’s past.”

“Thanks, Dad. But I have no intention of bringing myself into another situation that requires blackmailing Dante.” I wasn’t even sure if that was still something I could blackmail him with. Dante’s power was solidified, and the Scuderis didn’t hold any power at the moment.

We got out of the car and entered the vast building through the steel door. Inside the hall was split into different areas, one for martial arts and box fights, one for knife technique, and one for shooting, though that one was separated by noise barriers. Then there was an area off to the side where recruits would be submitted to light torture to test their endurance. This was where a recruit failed on occasion.

Most boys gathering in the hall for their evaluation today were fifteen or sixteen, but I caught sight of a few who looked a bit younger. Sometimes poor families of Italian descent hoped to earn money that way, but they didn’t know what price they had to pay first for money to start rolling in.

A hush fell over the boys and our soldiers as my father and I strode through the hall toward the back of the hall, where lockers and benches were situated. There wasn’t a privacy screen, and the three boys about to change out of their day clothes looked intimidated as my father and I stopped beside them.

I gave them a nod. Then I shrugged out of my jacket and unbuttoned my shirt. Of course, I could feel many of the boys throw me curious glances as I undressed down to my briefs. My body was littered with scars, and I made sure I was ripped. Dad did the same routinely. He too carried the scars of a man his position accumulated over the years. When I was dressed in a T-shirt and sweatpants, I headed toward Geno and two more soldiers who would help with the testing today.

I shook their hands, then motioned to the knife fight area. “I’ll start with the knife skills.”

“I’ll focus on shooting and questioning,” Father said.

“Will you join the questioning later too?” Geno asked me.

“Of course. But first, I’d like to get my heart rate up with some fighting.”

Geno chuckled. “Torture doesn’t have that effect on you after a while.”

“No,” I agreed.

I moved toward the mats where the knife fights were about to take place. There were also a few puppets to see the throwing technique of the boys. But I would get them tired before they could prove their aim. It was harder to hit a target if you were out of breath.

I noticed a tall boy whose face reminded me of Greco Senior, especially the square jaw. Unlike the other boys, he was by himself. He noticed my gaze and straightened. I motioned for him to come closer.

With a swallow I could see from afar, he pushed away from the wall and strode toward me under the scrutiny of his peers. “Fiorentino?” I asked louder than I usually would. I wasn’t sure how well he could hear me despite his hearing aids, and it was loud in the hall.

He nodded and gave me a hesitant smile.

“Why are you here?”

“To become a part of the Outfit,” he said without missing a beat, straightening even more. His speech was slightly off, but I had no trouble understanding him.

“I’ll test your fight skills first.”

He reached for his hearing aid.

“What are you doing?”

He flushed. “I want to take it off for the fight.”

I shook my head. “If this was a real fight, you’d need your hearing as an additional help against the enemy.”

“But it could fall off during fighting.”

“Of course, but until then, let’s use it to your advantage.”

The moment I began sparring with Fiorentino, it became apparent how determined and well-trained he was. There was still room for improvement, but he was better than many of the other boys here today.

I gave him a pleased nod as I pulled him to his feet after I’d thrown him to the ground. “Good work. Now show me your knife skills.”

His hands shook as he took the knife from me, but after a few deep breaths, they steadied, and he hit the target with his first throw.

When I was done with him, I motioned for the next recruit to step forward. Fiorentino moved on to the shooting area.

After an hour of testing fight skills, I moved on to the questioning. It was a crucial skill to protect secrets.

It was the turn of one of the boys who had shown lacking fight and knife skills. Despite this, he acted with utter confidence, even arrogance. He was the son of a Captain and probably considered himself above failure.

I nodded toward the chair in the center of this area, and he sank down on it with spread legs. “You know the rules. If you say stop, it equals breaking your vow of silence.”

“Got it.”

It didn’t take much for him to scream stop at the top of his lungs. My knife had left the shallowest cut in his arm, nothing that should get any kind of sound out of him. I tried a few other things, but it became apparent very quickly that he was incapable of tolerating a decent level of pain. He was useless for our purposes. If he had shown promise during fight training or knife skills, I might have considered allowing him to move on, but as it was, he needed a few more months to harden up. “Right now, you’re not ready to continue the initiation process. Train with your father and come back in six months.”

He staggered to his feet, his face turning red as he glanced around at the whispering recruits. “I’m already sixteen! I need to become a recruit.”

“Not with the skills or lack thereof that you displayed today,” I said simply. I didn’t like the challenging gleam in his eyes one bit.

He pointed at Fiorentino, who waited for his turn. “It’s not fair that someone like him becomes part of the Outfit, and I don’t.”

I grabbed him by the collar and glared down at him. “Then get a grip and stop bawling like a fucking pussy because I cut you.”

“It’s a stupid test.”

I shoved him to the ground. “If you can’t protect the Outfit’s secrets with your fucking blood, your fucking life, then you are not worthy of becoming a Made Man, understood? You can’t even begin to understand how little pain you’ve experienced yet. If you want to know real pain, then read the autopsy reports of the soldiers sent back from Camorra torture. And now get out of my sight, or I’ll give you a real taste of what torture looks like.”

The boy’s eyes grew wide. “My father will disinherit me if I don’t become a part of the Outfit!”

His father was Captain. His son had no chance of becoming one unless he improved drastically over the next months. Maybe one day, he could become a lowly soldier without any secrets to protect. “Then your father should have made you stronger.”

I looked down at his spiteful expression and hoped he’d keep whatever he wanted to say to himself. He scrambled to his feet. I turned to the next recruit. The boy spat in front of my feet. “At least I’m not fucking a cripple.”

“Oh shit,” Geno muttered.

I barely registered the unified intake of breaths as I lunged at the asshole. He had no chance against me as I slammed him to the ground. “Hold his tongue for me,” I snarled, overcome with utter rage. How dare he use that word?

Geno got down beside me, and with the help of another soldier, they extracted the boy’s tongue so I could cut off the tip. His eyes shot open as blood spurted out, and he screamed. He was lucky I didn’t rip his entire tongue out. This way, he could still speak.

I rose to my feet and stepped back, breathing harshly, then held out my knife toward one of the boys. “Clean it.” He took it and dashed away toward the sinks. “Remove this worthless piece of shit from here and tell everyone that I won’t tolerate anyone disrespecting my wife or using that fucking slur.”

Geno and the other soldier yanked the boy to his feet and dragged him away. Had he thought not being a Made Man and only sixteen would protect him? I had tortured people younger than him. This world didn’t protect you only because you weren’t an adult by outside standards. I would never allow anyone to talk about Emma that way.

“Mr. Mione, your knife,” a familiar, slightly slurred voice said. I glared at Fiorentino, still riled up, but he held my gaze until I took the knife. “Do you want to go next?”

Fiorentino swallowed but nodded. I motioned for him to move toward the chair so Geno, who was back, could shackle him to it. He had to step over the blood puddle on the floor that nobody had cleaned yet.

Dad stepped up to me, his expression unreadable. “Do you want me to take over?”

“Worried I’ll hurt them too much?”

Dad regarded me closely. He didn’t know I still had nightmares about Domenico. He stepped back. “I’ll return to the shooting range.”

I turned to Fiorentino. Unlike the asshole before him, he withstood the torture I subjected him to. After two more recruits, I excused myself and went to the changing area. I texted Renato and asked him if he had time to go out for drinks tonight. I fucking needed to get shit-faced. Then I told Emma I had too much work to do to be home for dinner.

Dad joined me.

“If Emma asks Mom or you, I’m working late tonight.”

Dad’s expression tightened with disapproval. “But you’re not.”

“I’m heading out with Renato. I need to take my mind off things.”

“In one of Renato’s establishments?”

“I’m faithful to Emma, Dad, no need for that disappointed voice. I’m not a boy.”

“Are things going well?” Dad asked quietly.

I looked around with a frown. “They are.” Dad nodded, then returned to the recruits. I took a small flask from my gym bag, briefly hesitated when I remembered Emma’s concern regarding my drinking habits, then took a few gulps from the vodka before I screwed the top back on and returned to the knife fight area. Two recruits broke down under torture today, especially the first younger one… what a day. I knew my night would be filled with familiar horrors if I didn’t manage to drink myself into a stupor.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Something crashed downstairs, ripping me from sleep. I sat up and turned on the lights. Another crash sounded. Samuel wasn’t home yet. What was going on?

Fear filled me. I knew I was never alone. If Samuel wasn’t home, there was at least one bodyguard on the premises, but I still wished he were here.

An even louder crash, followed by a curse. It wasn’t Samuel’s voice that had cursed. Anxiety filled my belly. A code was required to enter our home, so it had to be someone Samuel trusted who had entered. He’d never give the code to someone he didn’t trust, even if he was drunk. Plus, a guard team surveyed the entrance area and backyard. I hoisted myself in my wheelchair and moved to the elevator. When I arrived down in the foyer, I found Renato supporting Samuel, who seemed incapable of standing on his legs. His gaze was unfocused. They must have stumbled against the big decorative vases beside the entrance door, broken both, plus whipped the glass decoration from Murano off the sideboard. The mirror above it had a crack in it too. As I wheeled closer, a cloud of alcohol hit me.

“What happened?”

Renato shrugged, his gaze sliding over me. I realized I was only in my nightgown and crossed my arms over my chest. He finally looked away and focused on my face. “Nothing. He had a bit too much to drink. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

I gave him a disbelieving look, motioning at how Samuel hung in his grasp. “This isn’t normal. This isn’t just a bit too much to drink. He’s completely out of it.”

Renato took a step toward the staircase, obviously struggling with Samuel’s weight. “We had some fun. He can usually handle his liquor better.”

Because he had lots of practice. I pressed my lips together, trying to bottle up my anger. “As a friend, you shouldn’t let this happen.”

Renato scoffed, his eyes hard and mocking as they settled on me. “He’s an adult, a grown man. I won’t tell him what to do, and neither should you.”

My mouth opened. “Let’s agree to disagree.” Surprise crossed his face, then he shook his head. Luckily for us, he kept whatever crossed his mind to himself.

“Help me take Samuel upstairs,” I said simply and wheeled back into the elevator. Renato followed me without a word, still supporting Samuel who seemed to have passed out completely by now. “I’ll go up first. All three of us won’t fit inside.”

Once I was upstairs, I waited for the elevator to come up again.

“I didn’t think you’d be like this,” Renato said as he staggered out of the elevator.

“Like what?” I asked as I led him to our bedroom and watched as he dropped Samuel unceremoniously onto the bed. Samuel didn’t stir, and I was beginning to worry.

He straightened and watched as I moved toward the bed. “So opinionated and outspoken.”

I felt Samuel’s throat for a pulse and relaxed when I found it. “Because I’m a woman or a woman in a wheelchair?”

Renato gave me a caught smile, obviously realizing he’d overstepped his boundaries. Usually, I wasn’t this easily affronted. I’d heard too much to take other people’s opinions of me to heart, but my worry for Samuel was making me a tad touchy.

“I’m worried about Samuel,” I said simply. I didn’t want to get into an argument with one of Samuel’s best friends. Maybe his only friend, as I’d never seen him with anyone else.

Renato waved me off. “He’ll be fine. Just pop a couple of painkillers into his mouth and give him a strong coffee in the morning.”

“Can you help me get him out of his clothes?”

“Just let him sleep in them. That’s what I do.”

I gritted my teeth, growing annoyed at how blasé he was. Was it a man thing? A Made Man thing? Or was I really overreacting? I didn’t think so.

“All right. Thank you for getting him home. I’ll handle it from here.”

I pulled Samuel’s shoes off.

“Are you sure you don’t need help?”

“I’ve undressed him before, don’t worry,” I said, not even blushing. I was so frustrated with the situation. I felt helpless in a way I’d never experienced, not even when my body failed me after the accident, and I didn’t know how to come to terms with it.

Renato nodded, then he turned around, and I heard him walk down the stairs. I took a deep breath. After his shoes were off, I got rid of his socks, then leaned over him to unbuckle his belt. Getting him out of his pants was far more difficult than anticipated. Samuel was tall and much heavier than me. I hoisted myself onto the bed, hoping for a better angle. After plenty of tugging, his pants still hung around his hips. I blew out my breath and decided to deal with his shirt for now. But without his help, I couldn’t pull it off either. Tears of anger and frustration gathered in my eyes. I went to the bathroom in my wheelchair, pulled scissors from a drawer under the sink, and returned to Samuel. I began cutting away his shirt and the tank he wore beneath, then proceeded to destroy his pants in the same way. I hoped these weren’t his favorite clothes, but maybe that would teach him a lesson not to drink so much. Though I doubted Samuel was at a point where a lesson like that would stop him from drinking. We hadn’t been married for very long, but I wasn’t blind nor stupid. Samuel had a problem. I just wasn’t quite sure yet how serious it was.

I tugged the rags away and tossed them to the floor. Samuel didn’t stir. I left him in his boxers. Because he lay on the covers, I couldn’t even tuck him in. It wasn’t very cold in the bedroom, so I simply left him as he was and awkwardly crawled under the covers, which Samuel weighted down.

I extinguished the lights, but I was too agitated to fall asleep. My thoughts revolved around what I'd witnessed in the past two weeks. Samuel drank too much. He drank every day, especially when he was in a bad mood or stressed. I wasn't sure if I was overreacting. When could you call someone an alcoholic? Was there a universal rule? I couldn't ask anyone I knew. At least not from our families. But maybe I could ask Priest Agnello. Perhaps he had experience with Made Men who struggled with addiction, though I doubted many of them made their problem public since it could cost them their standing and, depending on their addiction, even their lives. I had to make sure Priest Agnello didn't think Samuel was the reason for my interest. Considering Samuel's controlled and poised outward appearance, I doubted many people would suspect him. Still, I couldn't risk anything. Too much was at stake.

Or was I overreacting? I had only gotten a small glimpse into Samuel's life. Maybe the past two weeks had been an exemption. Perhaps he didn't usually drink as much. Stress could do a lot to people. His life had changed drastically with our marriage as well.

Samuel snored, which only added to my anger. I had half a mind to sleep in one of the guest bedrooms, but I worried he'd stop breathing. What if he was close to alcohol poisoning? I covered my ears with another pillow and tried to fall asleep.

The mattress shifted, and Samuel groaned. Then something heavy landed on the floor. I sat up and turned on the lights. Squinting against the sudden brightness, I realized Samuel was no longer in bed beside me. I scooted over to the other side and looked down. Samuel lay on his side on the floor, still asleep.

There was no way I could get him back into bed, and for what? He'd probably roll out of bed again and possibly hit his head on the nightstand. He could sleep on the floor tonight.

I turned off the lights, but then worried that Samuel would throw up and I wouldn't notice until it was too late. I didn't want him to choke on his own vomit. With a sigh, I turned the lights on and lowered myself to the floor beside Samuel. I leaned against the bed with a cushion at my back and covered myself with the blanket, then extinguished the lights.

With my hand on Samuel's shoulder, I closed my eyes, hoping to catch at least a few hours of sleep. My dance session would be a mess otherwise.

I woke up on the floor. Even before I opened my eyes, I knew that was where I was. My stiff neck and back definitely spoke a clear language. But the worst pain was in my head. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this shitty after a night of drinking.

I peeled my eyes open and stared at Emma. She sat on the floor beside me, propped up against the bed, her head tilted awkwardly to the side. One of her hands rested on my arm. I rolled to my back, and her hand slid to my chest.

Fuck. What happened?

Renato must have brought me home last night. The idiot should have taken me to his place instead. Emma didn't need to see me like this.

I sat up despite the lightning strike of agony that hit my brain. I touched my temple and blew out a breath. After another moment to gather myself, I pushed to my feet. That was when I realized that my shirt hung in tatters from my body, and my pants looked as if an angry kitten had ripped into them. I found the scissors on the nightstand. I shook my head in amusement, then regretted it. Emma must have cut me out of my clothes. The thought sobered me immediately. Fuck. I hadn't noticed someone cutting clothes off my body with scissors. If someone had used the moment to attack… *Dammit*.

I bent down despite the way my vision swam and lifted Emma into my arms. She stirred as I gently laid her down in bed, and her eyes fluttered

open. “Shhh. It’s just me. Sleep.”

But her eyes opened all the way, and the look in them was like a douse of cold water. I moved to kiss her, but her hand came up and covered my mouth. “You smell like a liquor store.”

I straightened. “I’ll take a shower and brush my teeth.”

Emma tried to sit up in bed, then winced. “Ouch. Sleeping on the floor is a bad idea. Everything hurts.”

“Why did you?”

She gave me a look as if that should be obvious. “I was worried you’d throw up and choke on your vomit. I wanted to keep an eye on you.”

“I was fine.”

“You were not. You didn’t notice anything. You and Renato broke all our vases and decorations downstairs.”

“You can buy new stuff. You didn’t even pick the decorations, so this is your chance to get something that fits your taste.”

Emma gave me an indignant look. “Samuel, this is serious.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t make a big deal of it. I’m a grown man, and sometimes men get drunk, especially after a shitty day.”

I turned around and headed into the bathroom. I wasn’t in the mood for a discussion like that, especially not when my head felt like it was about to explode. Though, I’d probably never want to have this discussion.

I shoved down my briefs and what remained of my shirt, then stepped into the shower and turned it warmer than I usually showered because the prospect of cold water hitting my head wasn’t enticing at all.

Leaning against the tiles, I closed my eyes. After a couple of minutes, I could hear Emma enter the bathroom, then the sound of water in the sink followed by the electric toothbrush and the occasional squeal of her wheels.

I slowly opened my eyes and turned the water to as cold as I could bear, all the while watching Emma. She was focused on brushing her teeth, but I could tell she wasn’t happy with the situation. I stepped out of the shower, rubbed my hair dry, then wrapped a towel around my waist before I joined Emma at the sink. She looked up at me, her eyes briefly lingering on the bruises on my upper body. A few of the recruits had managed to land hits but nothing major.

“Why was yesterday shitty?” she whispered. Her brown eyes searched mine with concern and tenderness.

I sighed. I wasn’t sure how much I wanted to share with Emma. Finally, I said, “Two recruits had trouble with the questioning. For one of them, it was his second attempt to become an initiate, and he failed again because of his inability to withstand pain.”

Emma grimaced. “How old was he? I’m sure he’ll grow used to pain over time.”

“Sixteen. Old enough to bear the pain I caused, trust me. He’s too weak.”

“And that made you mad?”

“No, what made me mad was his reaction to me telling him he wouldn’t become an initiate. I had to make a bloody statement.”

Her eyes grew wide. “You killed him?”

“No, though it would have been a suitable reaction. I cut off the tip of his tongue.”

Emma paled. “But he’s only sixteen.”

“I have to lead my men and these recruits. If someone disrespects me, they’ll be met with my wrath. Now he knows and so does everyone else. Sometimes they all need reminding.”

She didn’t need to know how the asshole had disrespected her.

Emma swallowed thickly. I could see her mind working, wondering why that had made me get drunk.

“Stop worrying,” I told her, squeezing her shoulder.

Emma nodded, but I could tell she was still not convinced. She needed to learn when to give up.

On my way to a casino, Dante’s number flashed on my screen. I gritted my teeth. I didn’t think it was a coincidence that he called a day after I’d punished the boy. Had his father complained?

I answered the call. “Dante, to what do I owe your call?”

“Good morning, Samuel. I just wanted to inquire about the state of things in Minneapolis.”

“Let me guess, you got a call from an angry Captain yesterday because I punished his useless son?”

Dante chuckled. “No, not quite. His mother called Valentina, crying.”

I rolled my eyes. “So he ran to his mommy so she could protect him?”

“I don’t know the details, and I won’t call the father to find out. I assume you had a reason to punish an initiate like that.”

“He won’t become an initiate. He failed under torture twice, and he insulted me and my wife. He’s lucky I didn’t cut off more than the tip of his tongue.”

“Indeed,” Dante said. “He should be able to withstand torture at sixteen.”

“He’s weak. He won’t ever amount to anything. I could withstand more torture at twelve than that pussy.”

Again, a dry chuckle. “You are one of my best men, like your father.”

I waited for him to say more as I parked in front of the casino. This one was underground, hidden in a nondescript warehouse.

“But that decision falls under your jurisdiction and is not why I’m calling.”

“No?”

“I want Leonas to see how things are done in different cities. I’m sending him to Minneapolis for the entirety of August so you and Pietro can show him your ways to do business.”

Surprise filled me. My cousin Leonas was fourteen. Of course, he had already been inducted at thirteen. He would become Capo and couldn’t wait until he was fifteen or sixteen like some others. “We’ll show him the ropes and keep him safe.”

“He’s quite adept at protecting himself, but he’s also very cocky and boisterous.”

I knew of Leonas’s troublemaking ways but not everything, I was sure. Dante would make sure the worst didn’t become public. “We’ll keep him in check. Will he live with my parents?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sure Mom is ecstatic to have someone to coddle again.”

“She lost you and Sofia both in the same month.”

“Maybe Leonas will make her glad the nest is empty. No offense.”

“No offense taken. I’m very aware of Leonas’s nature.”

“The question is by what means do you want us to keep his nature in check,” I asked carefully.

Dante cleared his throat. “There are certain limits I’m not willing to cross due to Valentina.”

Of course. Dad too had been limited by how he could punish me by Mom’s love for me. “But those limits aren’t ours?”

“They aren’t. But obviously, he mustn’t be harmed in a way that won’t heal.”

“Of course not. I like the little shit a lot, so that will prevent that from happening anyway. The same goes for Dad.”

Dante chuckled again. “Little shit? You realize he’ll be your Capo one day.”

“And by the time he’s Capo, I’m certain he’s a man I’ll respect too much to remember I ever said those words.”

“*He will be*.”

We chatted more about the details of Leonas’s stay before I hung up. Having Leonas in Minneapolis added another problem to my shoulders, but I couldn’t refuse Dante.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In my registration for a tryout session, I hadn’t mentioned my last name out of worry that they would give a flimsy excuse not to have me there. The name Mione was notorious in Minneapolis after all.

So when I entered the reception area of the dance studio with Leo and another bodyguard, the eyes of the tall woman behind the counter grew wide, and so did the eyes of the handful of gathered customers who also waited for the ballet lesson.

I flushed. In many eyes, recognition flashed up. Samuel’s and my wedding had filled the tabloids for several days. I moved toward the lowered counter and smiled. “I’m here for the tryout session.”

“Emma… Mione, I assume?” the woman said in a sharp accent.

I nodded, trying to ignore the whispers that arose behind me. Leo stepped up beside me while my other bodyguard walked around, checking every room.

“Not the female changing rooms!” the woman shouted angrily.

Leo leaned forward on the counter, baring his teeth. “Then I suggest you tell whoever’s in there to leave so he can check it’s safe.”

The woman stiffened, but she did as he said. I could feel more heat travel up into my face. Maybe that was why it was better not to do courses in the outside world.

I looked around uncomfortably. A young man gave me a smile. His gait was a little off as if his knees were stiff. “I’m Albert. Natalya is a great teacher.”

I smiled in turn.

Leo pointed at the ring on my finger. “You know what that means in our world?”

Albert looked confused. “Don’t we live in the same world?”

Leo and the other man laughed darkly. “No, not even close.”

Albert flushed. “I’m into men, not women, so you should have pointed at your ring, not hers.”

I bit my lip. Albert was treading perilous waters.

Leo shook his head and exchanged a look with the other bodyguard. I was flustered by the time I was finally allowed to enter the changing rooms to put on my leotard and skirt. When I caught my reflection in the mirror, emotions bubbled up. I hadn’t felt the heavy dose of nostalgia in a long time. I squared my shoulders and headed back outside. Leo was right in front of the door while my other bodyguard stood beside the front door.

The other customers had left for the classroom, and I followed the sound of their voices into the bright room. I allowed my gaze to take in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors and barre where most of the dancers stretched. The last time I’d been in a room like this had been before my accident, but I felt a strange sense of belonging and homecoming I hadn’t expected as if this was the final missing puzzle piece.

Natalya came my way with a very small, tense smile. “You mentioned in your email that you have years of ballet practice.”

“A long time ago.”

She nodded. “How about you stretch too so you are warmed up for class? We’ll see how much of your past lessons you remember. Muscle memory is a wonderful thing.”

I gave her a smile, then said in a very low voice, “I’m sorry for the inconvenience with my bodyguards.”

Her gaze flitted to Leo, who leaned beside the door and regarded everything with utter boredom. “Maybe your bodyguards will eventually

realize we don’t pose a danger.”

My bodyguards weren’t the people I had to convince. Samuel would be an incredibly hard nut to crack, I feared.

Fifteen minutes into the dance training, I was already out of breath, and muscles I hadn’t used in a while ached from exertion. Even my arms, which I used frequently to lift out of my wheelchair, obviously needed time to get used to the intensity of training. Despite feeling out of shape, I felt a sense of right and of reuniting with a part of myself that had laid dormant. As I let my wheelchair glide to the music, I realized that I’d truly missed dancing and that it was still a part of me that I wanted to explore in this altered fashion.

That night, when Samuel and I packed our bags for our trip to Indianapolis the next day, I broached the subject. “Everyone’s very friendly at the dance studio, and I would love to continue.”

Samuel looked up from his drawer with ties. “Leo mentioned you seemed in your element, but the dance instructor wasn’t too happy about their presence.”

I nodded. “I think Leo’s presence intimidated most of them. Don’t you think having two bodyguards is overkill? I’m sure it would be fine if Leo stayed in his car in front of the studio. There’s only one entrance.”

“No,” Samuel said, his tone brooking no argument.

I opened my mouth, but he gave me a hard look. “My sister was kidnapped right under my nose. If we’d had more bodyguards with us, that wouldn’t have happened.”

“But why would anyone kidnap me?”

“Because you’re my wife. You’re Danilo’s sister. There are two Underbosses in your immediate family. It would make the Bratva’s, the Famiglia’s, and the Camorra’s day to get their hands on you.”

“You really think the Camorra would try something like that again? And the Famiglia has never targeted women.”

“I don’t trust any of them. We once thought nobody would step as low as to attack a bride on her wedding day.”

I nodded slowly. No girl in the Outfit would ever live that day down. “Okay. If that’s what it takes for me to keep dancing.”

“It is.”

I decided not to push Samuel. I didn’t want to risk him changing his mind about me taking ballet lessons.

The following afternoon, we took a private jet to Indianapolis with Renato in tow. He and Samuel spent most of the one hour and forty-five minutes chatting quietly.

Renato certainly looked like he could charm the pants off a girl. I still didn’t like the idea of him marrying Giorgia, even if that meant I would have my best friend in Minneapolis. I’d have to talk to Danilo and Giorgia about this—not that I thought I could change anyone’s mind. This was probably already a done deal.

I closed the romcom I had been reading when we landed in Indianapolis, then peered out of the window at the familiar sight. I had lost count of the times I’d been at this airport. In the first few years after my accident, my mother had taken me to specialists all over the world in the hope of giving my legs their previous functionality back. I had been relieved when she’d finally given up. It had been a sort of closure I’d needed to really start feeling comfortable in my new skin.

Samuel and Renato rose from their chairs and came toward me. Renato glanced at my book, then shook his head. “A book like that is what makes life for men today difficult. Women expect too much.”

I pursed my lips. “I’ll tell Giorgia to lower her expectations for you.”

Samuel chuckled at Renato’s less-than-amused expression and clapped his shoulder.

When Samuel, Renato, and I arrived at Danilo's mansion, I spotted Giorgia's brother's car out front. I only felt a brief sense of homesickness when I moved toward the front door with Samuel by my side.

"Behave," Samuel muttered under his breath a moment before my brother opened the door. He definitely hadn't meant me. That he had to remind Renato of it rubbed me the wrong way. I had to talk to Giorgia first before any insane deals were struck.

Danilo gave Samuel and Renato terse nods before he bent down and pressed a kiss to my cheek. I gave him a smile. "Are you all right?" he murmured as he scanned my face. I had trouble sleeping since Samuel came home stinking drunk, but of course I couldn't mention that to my brother. "I am."

"Giorgia and her brother are in the living room."

"I thought her mother wanted to come too?" I asked.

"Her brother is the master of the house. He has the last word on her future, not her mother," Danilo pointed out.

I moved toward the living area, where I found Sofia in conversation with Giorgia while her brother checked something on his phone. Giorgia pushed to her feet and rushed toward me, hugging me tightly. I too had missed her and only realized how much I did as I clung to her.

"I can't wait to live close to you," she whispered.

I pulled back. Sofia had gotten up as well and so had Giorgia's brother. I greeted him with a smile and Sofia with a hug. "I hope my brother behaves himself."

Her eyes twinkled with amusement. "It's a work in progress."

I laughed.

"What about Samuel?"

I shrugged. "Definitely a work in progress."

The men entered at that moment, and Giorgia's brother immediately went to them. They greeted each other with handshakes, but the atmosphere was way too testosterone-fueled for my liking.

Sofia cleared her throat. "I'll go into the kitchen and let them know we're ready for coffee and cake."

Renato sent Giorgia a smile that had her brother scowling. It was a little too intimate.

“Giorgia and I need to chat while you exchange your official pleasantries,” I muttered and motioned for Giorgia to proceed.

I led Giorgia into the lobby and shook my head. “Really, him?”

She pulled a face. “He’s the best option, Emma. I don’t have an Underboss jumping at the chance to marry me. I’ll be eighteen soon. My mother is losing her patience with me and so is my brother. They are ready to marry me off to that old bastard in Italy. He looks like a toad and is way too old. Just the thought of having to touch him…”

Giorgia looked like she was about to be sick. Then she blew out a breath. “Even if Renato is intolerable as far as I can tell from our short encounters, he’s at least quite good-looking, so I won’t be repulsed if we have to consummate the marriage at some point.”

I nodded because I totally understood. “You don’t mind that it’s a deal because you both are desperate?”

Giorgia shook her head. “Most arranged marriages are deals, right?”

I shrugged. But some deals were more tasteless than others. I still wondered why Samuel had agreed to marry me. That argument of strengthening the bond between our families was nonsense, that was for sure. “Samuel mentioned that Renato isn’t the faithful type.”

Giorgia chuckled. “He’s a Casanova and way too sure of himself. He’s cocky and annoying. He’ll drive me up the wall.”

“That doesn’t make him sound like marriage material.”

“He’s not, but I picked him. Mom will be annoyed that she won’t get her way, and I’ll figure out a way to deal with Renato once we’re married.”

I sighed. “I’m just happy you’ll live close to me.”

She grinned. “See, that makes marrying him worth it.”

When Giorgia and I returned to the living room, the men sat around the table and were already discussing wedding dates from the look of it.

“It looks like you’ll become my wife, Giorgia. Your brother showed me your doctor’s statement that you’re fertile. So let’s hope you’ll be pregnant with my heir by the time I turn thirty.”

My lips curled in disgust. That was also part of the deal? Giorgia had to provide an heir for him to inherit everything? I sent Giorgia a disbelieving look. She gave me an embarrassed smile.

“That’s a tasteless deal.” It burst out of me. “You’re behaving like a pig.”

Renato scowled. “I can’t see how my deal with Giorgia is any less tasteless than the deal between your brother and your husband that forced Samuel to marry you.”

My heart did a thud as I blinked at Renato.

Sofia sent Danilo a look that made it clear she knew about the deal, and Samuel looked ready to murder his friend. Apparently, everyone knew except for me. It reminded me of how my mother had lied to me after my accident under the pretense of trying to protect me when it had been just as much about protecting herself from the truth. This too felt like everyone had kept the details of the arrangement from me to avoid an unpleasant confrontation.

Fuck it. I scowled at Renato, who grimaced and gave me an apologetic look. Too late.

Emma paled, looking like she was about to cry.

“Emma—” Danilo and I said at the same time, but I stepped forward. Emma was my wife. It was more important that I cleared things up between us.

“Let’s have a word,” I told Emma and put a hand on her shoulder. She shied back from my touch, and I dropped my arm to my side.

“You can talk in my office,” Danilo said quietly. “And I’ll have a chat with Renato.”

For all I cared, he could rip Renato a new one, even if Renato wasn't his soldier.

Emma and I headed toward the office in utter silence. It was the first time I was allowed to be without Danilo in his office.

I closed the door, then immediately turned to Emma, who looked like she was teetering on the edge of a breakdown.

"Renato is an idiot. He shouldn't have said anything."

Emma fixed me with a hard look. "Did he lie?"

"You know that arranged marriages are always deals."

She shook her head. "You owe me the truth. What did Danilo do to make you marry me?"

I gritted my teeth. "It was a long time ago. I'm glad I married you."

"What did he do?"

I had feared the truth would come out eventually. "My sister Serafina refused to marry him after she was kidnapped. But he had a right to her hand. We wanted him to accept Sofia instead so Serafina could heal from her ordeal. He said he would only agree to marry Sofia if I married you."

I worried about what Emma would make out of this deal.

She turned her wheelchair so I had to look at her brown hair. Her voice was thick with tears when she spoke. "You must have hated to be blackmailed into marrying me."

I walked around so I could look at her. She was clutching her hands, and tears were running down her cheeks. "Your brother didn't blackmail me, Emma. We had an agreement, one like almost all marriages in our world are based on. I understand your anger. Sofia was angry too when she found out."

Emma swallowed thickly. I hated not seeing her face, so I squatted in front of her and took her hand despite her tension at my closeness.

I hated seeing her so broken up. "You were too young for me, and Sofia was too young for Danilo. That's why *neither* of us wanted to marry you girls."

Emma looked me straight in the eye. "Danilo is attracted to Sofia."

I frowned. "He definitely wasn't back then, or I would have put his dick into a vise." I moved closer. "And you know I'm attracted to you. Or do I need to show you more often?" I allowed my expression to become hungry, but Emma didn't crack a smile.

I realized I needed to give Emma more than just a sexual innuendo. And in the few weeks since our marriage, I had already seen that she was a good match for me beyond the bedroom as well, even if her worry meant I had to be more careful about my drinking habits.

I cleared my throat. “I’ve never regretted marrying you, and I know I won’t. I’m fucking glad your brother asked me to marry you. You are the woman I needed in my life. Your resilience and your ability to let the past rest and just enjoy the present is something I aspire to succeed at as well.”

Surprise crossed Emma’s face at my words. I straightened, feeling as if I’d bared my soul with that simple admittance. Emotional declarations always made me want to wash my mouth out with soap, but I could tell it had the desired effect.

She let out a small sigh. “I’m not perfect. I too get caught up in events from the past sometimes or want to give up on certain things if I’m frustrated. But I agree, I think we’re a good match.”

I nodded. “We are, and we’ll be even better together once we know more of the other. It takes time.”

She tilted her head. “Sometimes I’m not sure you really want me to know more about you. You have very high walls. It’s hard to break through them.”

She had a point. I wanted a wife whom I could trust, but at the same time, I knew I’d have to bare my soul to her on many levels to reach the kind of trust my parents had. It was an uncomfortable thought for me. “I know. I’m working on it.”

“And please promise me you won’t hide anything from me to protect me. I can handle things, and I want to handle them.”

“I know you can.”

That night, I showed Emma just how happy I was about our bond—with my fingers, tongue and cock—despite her worry about Danilo being under the

same roof. For all I cared, he could hear me giving his sister several orgasms. Thankfully, I didn't hear anything of the sort from Sofia's and his bedroom.

When Emma had fallen asleep, I went downstairs. Light spilled out from Danilo's office. I needed a drink. The flask I'd taken with me was already empty. I knocked briefly, then entered the office. Danilo sat on the sofa with a tumbler in his hand and across from him was Renato. "I need a drink too."

Danilo scanned me. My hair was slightly disheveled, and I was only in pajama pants and a shirt since it was past midnight. His expression darkened further when Renato wiggled his eyebrows. I accepted the glass of whiskey that Danilo held out to me, then sat down in the armchair beside Renato. I was still pissed at him.

We chatted about casinos and brothels, staying away from the topic of our wives. I was more than glad not to discuss my marriage with Danilo. Eventually, Danilo stopped drinking while Renato and I began a new bottle of whiskey that he offered us. It was past two in the morning, and I could tell that Danilo would have gone to bed if he trusted us alone in his office.

"I thought you wanted to leave early in the morning?" he asked.

"We do."

"Then you'll need a driver."

I cocked an eyebrow. "I can drive."

"I doubt you'll be sober enough by morning."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "That's none of your business."

"But my sister's safety is my business. A drunk driver ruined her life."

I gritted my teeth. "Stay out of my fucking business, Danilo."

"Come now, let's not get into a fight over this. I can assure you Samuel can hold his liquor better than anyone else I know."

I sent Renato a dark look. Did he really think that was a compliment?

I didn't finish the drink in my glass.

Danilo hovered when Emma, Renato, and I got into the rental car. But he obviously realized I wasn't still drunk—I hadn't even been drunk last night—and let us leave without another argument. I had a feeling he had said something to Emma about my drinking, though, because she was a little tense during the ride to the airport. I didn't ask. It wasn't a topic I wanted to discuss with her or anyone.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Samuel

A little over a month after our wedding, Emma and I had to attend our first social event in Minneapolis: my mother’s fifty-first birthday party.

Emma looked stunning in a terracotta evening dress that accentuated her narrow waist. The neckline was low, giving me a tantalizing look at the swell of her breasts. Jealousy reared its head when I considered the view many men would get.

As usual, my mother had to invite the families of every Captain. Sofia had flown in for one night too, but without Danilo because he was busy with business. Dante and his family were there too, minus my cousin Anna who was in Paris. Dante’s presence meant Dad and I could talk to him and Leonas later.

I greeted most people with a brief nod and shook the occasional hand. Most of the guests had been at our wedding as well. I could tell Emma felt uncomfortable under the force of everyone’s attention. Eventually, when we settled a little to the side in the living room with glasses of champagne, I told her, “You’ll get used to it.”

“I’m used to it,” Emma insisted. “But that doesn’t mean I like it. I keep hoping people will start ignoring me.”

“You’re the wife of the next Underboss. Nobody is ever going to ignore you. You married the wrong man for that kind of life. Will you be okay with it?”

Emma pursed her lips, then gave a small shrug. “I don’t have a choice, right?”

I shook my head. She didn’t. She’d have to attend even more social functions than me in the future to schmooze the wives of the Captains and certain politicians.

“I just wish people would stop giving me *that* look.”

I let my gaze wander over the gathered guests, but people were careful to keep their faces neutral when they felt my eyes on them. Still, I caught the occasional look of doubt.

“What look?”

“Like I’m a liability,” Emma muttered, her eyes full of indignation.

I emptied my champagne. “They’re ignorant. Eventually, they’ll realize they were wrong.”

When people looked at us, they pinpointed Emma as the weakness in our relationship because what people perceived as her flaw was apparent to the naked eye. My flaws were well hidden.

One of my great-aunts, who was only invited because honor dictated it and not because my parents liked her, approached us with a benevolent smile. She stopped in front of us and supported her weight on her walking stick. She was probably around ninety. “Samuel and his wife,” she said with a too bright smile, but her eyes were like those of a hawk. “When can we expect offspring?”

My mouth set in a tight line. Emma took a sip from her champagne, her expression pinching.

“That’s a very private question, Aunt,” Dante said as he came up behind her. She clucked her tongue but excused herself with a tight smile. Valentina and Leonas joined us a moment later.

Dante gave Emma a small smile before he turned to me. “How about we discuss Leonas’s stay now?”

“Business talk at your sister’s birthday?” Valentina asked with a frown.

Emma shrugged and rolled her eyes.

“It’s not a milestone birthday,” I said. Mom had celebrated her fiftieth birthday with a huge party last year.

“Excuse us,” I told Emma and Valentina. I knew Valentina would keep Emma entertained until my mother could evade the chatty wives she was stuck with.

Leonas gave me a bored look. “Samuel.”

“Leonas,” I deadpanned.

Dante and I walked ahead toward Dad’s office. I didn’t see him anywhere. Maybe he was already waiting for us. Leonas trailed us a few steps, letting his cool gaze scan the crowd, but nothing caught his interest. Knowing him, he preferred a very different kind of celebration, with pot, booze, and girls.

As suspected, Dad was in his office, probably already tired of socializing. He greeted us with a new bottle of bourbon and handed glasses to Dante and me.

Leonas scoffed. “Come on, Uncle Pietro. I’m a Made Man. I fuck girls, I kill, I torture, and you refuse to give me a drink like I’m a little kid?”

Pietro looked at Dante, who had the last word on the matter.

I didn’t remember the first time I’d had a drink. Maybe after my first time when I was fourteen.

“As with almost everything, it’s a matter of moderation,” Dante drawled with a hard look at Leonas.

“Why would I want to fuck in moderation?”

“You won’t ever talk like that in front of your mother.”

“She knows I’m not a virgin anymore. There are no virgins in the mafia.” I could tell he was riling up his father on purpose. I remembered times when I was like that too.

“One drink,” Dante clipped.

Leonas winked at me. Dad handed him a tumbler, and we finally clinked glasses.

“Whoo,” Leonas exclaimed, letting out a hiss after downing the drink in one gulp.

I could tell he would be a handful to keep in check. His teenage antics would undoubtedly drive me up the wall.

He and I stayed in the office when Dad and Dante left a little later.

Leonas lifted his glass. I rolled my eyes and poured him a small sip.

“When you take over from your father, will you change how things are handled?” he asked, suddenly dead serious and not sounding like a teenager at all.

I cocked an eyebrow. “In what regard?”

“The Outfit has shown a lot of restraint over the years when we should have sought revenge, when we should have sent a bloody message.”

I didn’t say anything. “Some things aren’t for me to decide, even once I’m Underboss. That’s the job of a Capo.”

“When I’m Capo, our enemies will regret they ever underestimated us.” I didn’t think they underestimated us. They knew Dante had a more controlled approach to many things. Leonas’s green eyes met mine. “I definitely won’t stop you from getting revenge on the crazy fuckers in Las Vegas.”

My smile became hard. “We killed one of their Underbosses.”

Leonas shook his head. “That’s not enough. Don’t tell me it’s enough for what Remo Falcone and his brothers did.”

It wasn’t, but unless we did what he had done, I didn’t see how it could ever be enough. “You are young. Until you’re Capo, your perspective will change.”

Leonas smirked.

I wasn’t looking forward to August. Another wedding to attend with Renato and Giorgia’s last-minute nuptials, becoming Leonas’s babysitter, and worst of all, the anniversary of Arlo’s, Enea’s, and Domenico’s death.

Emma must have felt my darkening mood because she often regarded me in worry. I knew she wanted to help, but I didn’t see how she could. I was taking over more and more tasks from my father every day to make the switch to me becoming Underboss go as smoothly as possible, but that also meant the focus shifted more and more toward me, and, as a result, also on Emma. Our life would remain in the spotlight for a while, especially with

people wondering when, how, and if we'd ever have children. I wasn't too keen on becoming a father yet, not with the tasks ahead in the next couple of years. Emma and I had never discussed the matter of children or the prevention thereof. I hadn't ever used protection, so I couldn't help but wonder if Emma could conceive. We had only been married for six weeks, so it wasn't as if it was unusual, even without protection, that she wasn't pregnant.

Still, I was reluctant to approach the subject of children with Emma. I didn't want to rip open certain wounds, but I also despised relying on the tasteless rumors making the rounds to build my knowledge.

After dinner, I had gone to my office to check the documents our accountant had sent us for the dummy corporations we upheld to launder our drug money, but now I went in search of Emma to finally broach the subject with her. I found her in the living room, huddled into a corner of the sofa with a book. Emma looked up from her book, her brows pulling together as she scanned my face.

I gave her a tight smile and sank down on the sofa beside her. She watched me curiously. "Is something the matter?"

"As you know, we're expected to have children," I said carefully. I was tired of the subtle and not-so-subtle comments from friends, soldiers, and distant relatives—my parents rarely bugged me with this—regarding our nonexistent chances of having children. I wanted certainty.

She put her book aside and leaned back, pursing her lips. "You want to discuss it now?"

I couldn't determine the emotion in her voice, but she was not happy about the topic. "I think we should do it sooner rather than later. You never mentioned if the accident caused any injuries that would affect us having children and whether we might need help becoming parents."

She tilted her head, regarding me with a quiet intensity that almost made me squirm. "Of course, it's always good to be prepared, but what makes you think we need help?"

The way she emphasized help made it clear she didn't like my choice of words. To be honest, I had never researched the matter and didn't know what exactly needed to be done in our case. "Emma," I said firmly. Despite the short time we were married, I knew she didn't like to be reduced to her wheelchair, but we needed to face the reality of the situation. I didn't have

any detailed knowledge about the extent of her injuries from the accident, and I didn't trust Danilo or my mother-in-law to be honest with me. "You know what I'm talking about."

"I do," she said with a small sigh. "You think I'm infertile because I'm in a wheelchair like so many rumors are suggesting, which is another reason I was labeled damaged goods. You could have asked me instead of believing the rumors."

Emma calling herself damaged goods made my blood boil. Nobody had dared to call her that in my presence, or they would have suffered a similar fate as the useless recruit.

She was right. My assumption was based solely on the information that had been making the rounds in our circles and that even my parents had shared, which neither Emma nor her parents had ever contradicted. "I assumed the injury to your spinal cord resulted in infertility issues."

Fuck, I wasn't a doctor, and like many men in our circles, I really didn't like to think or talk about women's issues.

"It can cause certain issues to keep a pregnancy or become pregnant at all, but in my case, it doesn't. Of course, other issues having nothing to do with the accident might lead to the same infertility issues every woman might be affected by. I'm as fertile as a woman with working legs can be. I can get pregnant, and I can bear children, and my doctor assured me that I don't have a higher risk of a miscarriage than any other woman does."

"All right," I said slowly, feeling relieved. "If that's the case, then why didn't you or your parents say something to dissuade the rumors?"

She smiled bitterly. "Because," she said, "my fertility isn't anyone's business. You make it sound as if I should have defended myself. My value isn't based on my reproductive organs, Samuel. I'm telling you now because you asked and because, as my husband, you deserve to know, but anyone else can just assume whatever they want."

When she was angry like that, with her skin flushed and her hair a little messy from her agitation, she was even more gorgeous. She was always lovely, not just when she was angry, but then in particular.

"It would have killed the rumors."

"People would have found new things to gossip about," she said with a small shrug, but I could see that it bothered her.

"They always do," I agreed. "I assume you want children?"

I had to admit I was relieved we wouldn't have to use additional help. The idea of having to shoot my load into a little cup so doctors could get Emma pregnant just made me uncomfortable. It was ridiculous, but I simply wanted to get her pregnant the natural way.

Her expression softened. "I do."

I nodded, glad we'd discussed the matter. "I never use protection, and we have sex a lot." I couldn't stop the smirk from appearing on my face.

Emma nodded. "I'm taking the pill."

I narrowed my eyes in thought. "Shouldn't you have told me?"

"Up until now, you didn't seem to be concerned about contraception. I assumed you didn't care."

"Why are you taking the pill? Do you feel too young to become a mother?"

"Maybe, to a small degree, but mainly, I don't think we're ready for kids yet."

We still barely knew each other. Things were getting easier by the day, but I was definitely still emotionally detached. I wasn't sure when and if that would change. "Our marriage is still young, but many couples in our world don't let that stop them."

Emma bit her lip. "Do you even want children now?"

I didn't have a deeply buried longing for children. I wanted them at some point. "I'm more curious why you don't want them now."

Something in her expression set my alarms off. She leaned forward and touched my hand. "Samuel, I'm not stupid, nor am I blind. Before we should consider having children, I think you need to work on your problem."

I narrowed my eyes and pulled my hand away. "What problem?"

She sighed. "Your drinking."

Samuel jerked to his feet, his expression turning ice cold. Samuel wasn't a man who raged or shouted, and while it was something I appreciated, his quiet anger and broodiness could be difficult as well. "You don't know what you're talking about," he clipped. "Most Made Men have a drink after a shitty day. If you saw what we do, you'd have a drink too, trust me."

I'd expected this reaction and also his explanation.

"You drink more than one glass or two, and when you work from home, you drink throughout the day."

"Have you ever seen me drunk, Emma?" he growled. "Except for that one time I went out with Renato. One fucking time."

"You're right. That was the only time I saw you drunk," I said softly. "And that's what really worries me, considering how many bottles of whiskey are in our trash every week."

Two weeks ago, I noticed it and then started checking. Maybe the history of my accident made me sensitive to alcohol problems, but everyone would have been shocked by how many empty bottles were in the trash, and those were only the drinks Samuel had at home, not when he was in Outfit establishments.

"You're my wife, Emma, not my nanny. Not even my mother shoved her nose into my business like that. I'm a grown man and don't need someone to tell me how much I can drink." He glanced down at his watch.

“It’s getting late. I still have work to do. And maybe I’ll have another drink while I do.”

He held my gaze with a look of challenge and fury.

I didn’t say anything, feeling my throat tighten at his harsh words. He turned on his heel and left me sitting there.

I resisted the urge to follow him. I hated unfinished arguments, and this felt very much like an unfinished argument. He obviously felt attacked by my words when I was only driven by concern.

Maybe I should have approached the matter differently, but I didn’t know how. I didn’t have experience with addiction. Not that I was sure that Samuel had already crossed the line to being an addict, but he was definitely teetering on the edge. His alcohol consumption was far from moderate—that much was clear. I wished I could talk about this with someone, but I absolutely trusted only a few people—Danilo and Giorgia, but the former disliked Samuel, and the latter was busy with her last-minute wedding.

I couldn’t talk to Danilo because he would only confront Samuel in an attempt to protect me, which would only anger Samuel more. Not to mention that he’d see it as a breach of trust. Maybe I could talk to Mom. She wasn’t always easy, but maybe this was something she could help me with. She had led a happy marriage with Dad after all. But she’d only just found new happiness since Dad had died, and I didn’t want to worry her unnecessarily. She’d spent too many years fretting over Dad’s and my health.

I was on my own in this. I had to follow my gut instinct and try to keep talking to Samuel and show him my support.

Samuel didn’t come to bed until the early morning hours. I had just turned off the lights because I was too agitated to sleep and had finished my book when I heard him coming up the stairs. The door opened and light spilled

in, illuminating my tall, broad husband. He'd already gotten rid of his tie, and his shirt was half unbuttoned. As usual, the sight of Samuel's toned body tightened my belly in the most torturous way. I had never felt desire this acute.

Something in Samuel's expression told me he'd drunk again, maybe even more so than usual, maybe to prove a point. To prove that he was in control of his choices, of himself.

"You're late," I said into the silence. Samuel came into the dark room but left the lights in the hallway on. He unbuttoned his shirt and discarded it on the floor. Then he stalked toward the bed. I wondered if he wanted to continue our argument. His pissed expression suggested it, but instead, he bent over me, cupped the back of my head, and slammed his mouth down on mine. I gasped against his lips, and his tongue slipped in. As expected, he tasted like the expensive whiskies lining the shelves in his office. The taste was pleasant, a little smoky and sweet, but I still hated that he'd drunk to prove a point. His tongue teased mine, and soon sparks seemed to fill my body, and heat gathered between my legs.

He dragged his lips away and tugged down my nightgown before he sucked my breast into his mouth. I gasped at the unexpected sensation. His motions were less inhibited, almost wild, as he licked and sucked at my breast, his teeth grazing my nipple several times.

"Samuel," I got out in a shaky whisper. "Are you—"

"I don't want to talk," he rasped. "I want to eat you and then fuck you."

Maybe I should have stopped him. Solving our problems with sex seemed like a recipe for disaster, but I yearned for him.

He slid down my body, shoved my panties down and my legs apart, and then he sucked my clit hard. I cried out, completely overwhelmed by the intensity of the sensation. He released my clit after another slightly softer tug and pushed his tongue into me. I gasped as he slammed his tongue into me hard and fast and spread me even wider open for better access. His stubble lightly scratched my ass cheeks and inner thighs, and the friction turned me on even more. He'd never been this dominant and demanding before. I squirmed helplessly on the bed, my fingers digging into the sheets, my shock-widened eyes peering up at the shadowy ceiling as Samuel teased my opening relentlessly with his tongue. There was something animalistic about his unrestrained, barely controlled touch. I risked a glance down but

could only see his blond head and hear him. He didn’t let up his penetration. I rocked my hips desperately, wanting to be touched where I throbbed fiercely. Samuel pulled back, and I whimpered. “Hold still,” he ordered in a low growl.

I bit my lip, my nails scratching over the linen, waiting for Samuel to continue, but he waited almost a minute as if he wanted to see if I would obey him and really lie still. His fingers spread me open, and I shuddered at his touch. Then he pushed his tongue into me so very slowly, still not touching my clit. He slid back out unhurriedly. I was incredibly aroused, almost delirious with the need to come. Samuel circled my opening with his tongue, and I moaned. “Samuel, I need—”

“No,” he clipped, then fucked me slowly with his tongue again. I squeezed my eyes shut, panting.

I wasn’t sure how much more I could take of Samuel’s teasing. Maybe it was even a sort of punishment. Samuel’s tongue brushed up and down, sometimes so lightly the touch seemed almost nonexistent, sometimes demanding and hard, but it never grazed my clit where I needed his touch the most. Soon, he turned his attention back to my opening. His tongue began to circle me, teasing me again. Even though he never touched my clit, I could soon feel an insistent pounding in my sensitive nub. Maybe I would come without being touched there.

He pulled away, and I whined in protest. He chuckled low in his throat. “I love how wet you are. I can taste how much this turns you on. You are dripping on my tongue.”

Embarrassment washed over me, and I felt myself blush fiercely. Luckily, Samuel couldn’t see it, but he probably knew. I’d never been this wet, not even close, but Samuel’s touch lit my body on fire.

“You’re going to come now,” he growled.

He slammed two fingers into me and sucked my clit, and I shattered under the force of the pleasure.

I could feel my flesh pulsating against his mouth as I shoved my head into the pillow, my fingers raking over the sheets. Samuel groaned against me.

I was still reeling from my orgasm when Samuel pushed to his feet and rolled me over on my belly. I heard him open his belt, and the rustling of his clothes told me he was getting naked. My core clenched in anticipation

even though I wasn't sure how much more my body could take at this point. His weight pressed down on me, his hot breath against my shoulder as he kissed me there, then my throat. I panted against the pillow, unable to move. He rubbed his tip along my opening until I was panting for more. Holding my hips, he pushed into me.

My breathing hitched when he settled all the way inside me. I felt so full, and the angle offered a new, more intense sensation.

"You feel good, Emma," he murmured, his lips grazing my cheek as he slowly eased out of me before he thrust back inside.

He snaked his arm under me and pressed his finger against my clit. The intense pressure of my clit and his deep thrusts soon had me moaning uncontrollably into the pillow.

Samuel always made me forget everything else in these moments when our bodies joined. The feel of him on top of me, inside me, his warm breath against my neck, his deep moans…became my sole existence until stars exploded before my eyes and the waves of pleasure coursing through my body blasted away all else.

His release spilled into me, and I shivered under a new wave of pleasure. Samuel became slack on me, his breathing still hot on my neck and his cock softening inside me.

His finger still pressed against my clit but didn't move anymore. I wanted to stay like this forever. I didn't want to return to being mad at each other.

Yet Samuel took a deep breath and got off me. I stayed on my belly, too exhausted to move. Samuel moved in the room and returned a moment later with a washcloth that he used to gently clean me. The caring gesture made my heart thud madly in my chest. Then he stunned me by kissing my ass cheek. "I love your ass. It's beautiful like the rest of you. Beautiful inside and out." His words were laced with tiredness and alcohol. Had the whisky spoken? Or had it only teased out words that he'd usually keep to himself?

"Thank you," I said quietly.

Samuel stretched out beside me and fell asleep without another word, his breathing deep and low.

I was wide awake. My pulse was still racing, and Samuel's words kept repeating in my head. They had been tender and affectionate. I could feel

myself falling for him, having already had a crush on him even before we'd married.

But should I turn a blind eye to his struggles for now? Should I allow our bond to grow before I tried again?

Would he ever even let me get close enough to admit any problems to me?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I glared at the whisky in my hand. Since Emma's words, every drop had tasted bitter, laced with guilt. What right did she have to judge me? She didn't know anything about me. Even if I drank a bit too much on occasion, with the shit I had to deal with on a daily basis, this was to be expected.

I set the glass down on the side table and leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. In the past, I'd only drunk at parties or to celebrate something with fellow Made Men. Drinking alone had started after Serafina got kidnapped and my friends died because of my idiotic attempt to save her. Alcohol had become a way to numb the guilt, the anger, the worry, the sadness.

In our world, men were supposed to appear invincible. Admitting any kind of weakness was out of the question. Maybe I had a problem, but I was in control. I could stop if I wanted to. But if I refused to drink with company, people would eventually ask why. If I mentioned I didn't drink at all, they'd think I had a problem. They'd see it as a weakness—something I couldn't risk. I was in control. Emma was simply sensitive because of her past. I got it. The past clung to me too. I downed my whisky. I was in control, and Emma would soon realize it.

In the following two weeks, I tried to drink only with company and not at home. It worked out except for a few minor slips when Leonas drove me up the wall with a risky maneuver. The brat wouldn't get himself killed while under my protection.

But my good intentions went to hell when the anniversary of my friends' deaths loomed on the horizon. Renato offered to join me at their graves, but I declined. This year, I didn't feel like company. Of course, Emma knew something was up and came into my office the night before the anniversary of the attack on the Falcone mansion and the brutal deaths of my friends.

She was already in a flimsy white nightgown, her curls trailing down her slender shoulders when she moved toward me. I sat in my desk chair, a half-empty bottle of bourbon on the desk and a half-full glass in my hand. I met her gaze over the rim as I downed the rest of the liquor.

Emma's eyes were concerned, not accusing. I would have preferred her anger. "Tomorrow is the day you lost your friends, right?"

Her voice was gentle and careful as if she worried I'd break down at the mere mention of it. I had never broken down in public. I hadn't even cried after their deaths. I kept my emotions bottled up as deeply as I could.

"The day they got murdered because of me, yes," I said, pouring myself another glass. Emma watched but didn't say anything.

"It's okay to be sad, you know? Even as a Made Man, it's okay to be sad to have lost someone."

Sadness wasn't at the forefront of my emotions anymore. It hadn't been in a while. Now it was mainly guilt, regret, and bitterness.

"Mostly, I'm angry with the stupid Samuel of the past," I admitted after another gulp. Heat spread in my insides, and the numbing effects of the alcohol were becoming apparent.

Emma moved even closer and touched the hand resting on the armrest. "He did what he thought was right. He wanted to protect someone he loved

more than anything else.” Her voice vibrated with emotions.

I took a deep gulp, my heart clenching. “And she betrayed me for a man who is incapable of love, a man who kidnapped and brutalized her.” Emotions from the past came up, but I squashed them. Sofia wanted contact with Serafina. Maybe she hoped it would all make sense then, but over the years, every contact with my twin had made her decisions of the past make less sense to me, and it made me regret my own choice all the more.

“Do you want me to come with you when you visit their graves tomorrow? That’s what you’ll do, right?”

“In the afternoon. Their families will visit the graves in the morning. But I don’t think you should come.” It was a deeply personal moment.

Emma curled her fingers around mine. “I might not be able to walk, but I’ll carry your worries as if they’re mine, Samuel. You don’t have to shoulder all the problems by yourself. I’m your wife, and I’m here for you, *always*.”

I regarded my wife. She obviously wanted to help me. Maybe she needed this even more than I did. I had been pushing her away in the past few weeks—not that I’d allowed her a deep look into my heart before that. I emptied the glass and gave a terse nod. “Maybe then you’ll understand why I feel the way I do.”

Emma smiled, then pried my fingers off the armrest. “Will you come to bed? It’s late.” Her eyes flitted to the now almost empty bottle.

I nodded and got to my feet. I needed to feel and taste Emma to distract myself. The alcohol didn’t do the trick today. Sleep was out of the question anyway.

I returned home in the early afternoon to pick up Emma. She was dressed in a dark blue dress and a cardigan of the same color with very little makeup. Maybe this was her way to pay respects to the dead. I too had chosen a dark suit for once, though I doubted the dead cared what we wore.

We were silent on the ride to the graveyard, and I was glad Emma didn't try to make small talk. I was on edge, had been all day, and the flask I'd emptied before I'd picked up Emma hadn't helped in the slightest.

If she could smell the alcohol on me, she didn't show it. I parked in my usual spot right in front of the south gate entrance. Emma and I followed the fine gravel path I always took, then stopped in front of Arlo's light gray granite family crypt. It was close to the pathway, so Emma only had to cross a short distance of grass. However, the grass slope was bumpy, so I pushed her the rest of the way until we stood right in front of the pyramid-shaped crypt.

Over the years, the number of flowers put down on the anniversary of their deaths had become fewer, and as I stepped inside the narrow, dark crypt, I didn't find a single flower on Arlo's headstone. I put down the white carnations Emma had bought before I'd picked her up.

I shifted to the side so Emma could look inside. The space was too narrow for her. It was the smallest of the three crypts we'd visit today. Arlo's father had died two years ago during a fight with the Bratva, and his mother had taken her life a few months ago. Now it seemed I was the only one still mourning him. I too only came once a year now.

"I'm sorry, my friend," I murmured, then motioned for Emma to move back. Together, we left and traveled in silence toward Enea's family crypt two graves down the aisle.

His grave had two bouquets on it. One from his younger sister and one from his parents. In the past, his fiancée had put flowers there too, but she was long married and had two children. Emma regarded me closely, but my expression was a cold mask. If she hoped to find a crack in it, then her chances were the best at Domenico's grave.

When we moved on to his grave, I felt a flood of memories rising. I rarely allowed them anymore, but they sometimes still came at night, but on the day of his death, I always let the memories take hold of me. Emma and I entered the white marble crypt of Domenico's family. His grave was covered with flowers as always, and the photo of him and our group of friends, minus myself, sat in front of it. I got down on my haunches and touched the grave. Briefly closing my eyes, I remembered the look of agony on his face before he died and his cries for his mom and his begging. "I'm sorry, my friend."

Emma touched my shoulder. I glanced at her. Tears brimmed in her eyes. Tears I would never allow myself. She gave me a small, emotional smile.

“Do you understand now? Can you see what my actions have done?”

“I understand that you’re judging yourself because of what you know now, but I think you would forgive yourself if you reminded yourself of what past Samuel knew: that your twin was in the hands of the brutal enemy, that she was being tortured and possibly raped, and that nobody would risk to save her, except you.”

I shook my head. “Domenico’s mother judges me for both, and it’s her right.”

“Maybe she can’t forgive you for many reasons, but I know you should forgive yourself.”

“I’m not a forgiving man, not toward others and not toward myself.”

Emma touched my cheek. “I can see that. But if you can’t do it for yourself, then maybe do it for us and for the family we’ll one day have.”

After witnessing Samuel’s guilt and sadness at the graveyard, I decided to do something. If he wanted to have any chance of fighting his alcohol problem, he needed to move on and forgive himself. But he would never do it because he didn’t feel like he could.

Leo gave me a questioning look when I told him to take me to Domenico's parents. "I don't know if that's a good idea. I'll have to ask Samuel."

I narrowed my eyes. "Do you have to ask Samuel for permission for every little thing I do?"

"This isn't a little thing." He picked up his phone but couldn't reach Samuel. "He's questioning someone and not available. We'll have to wait."

I shook my head. "Then I'll call a taxi."

"That's not an option."

"Then drive me there. It's part of my duty as Samuel's wife to get to know the families of his soldiers, right?"

Leo looked less than convinced, but he finally started the car. Of course, he tried to call Samuel two more times during the drive.

I wasn't sure if maybe I was crossing a line I shouldn't, but I needed to give it a try. Domenico's family lived in a small house in the suburbs. I didn't know much about them and had only met Domenico's mother and brother when she raged in the restaurant. I was a tiny bit anxious about how she'd react, but I was willing to risk her wrath if it meant I could put in a good word for Samuel.

Leo didn't leave my side as we made our way to the front door and he rang the bell. "I'll have to interfere if she loses it again. Grief isn't an apology. It's been years."

"Don't tell her that," I whispered.

The door opened, and Domenico's mother stood in front of me. Her eyes widened when she spotted me. She was in a bathrobe and looked slightly disheveled.

"I hope we didn't wake you," I said.

She scowled. "Of course not. I prepared my husband and son breakfast before they left to do their duty for the Outfit."

I could hear that she didn't think they should still be part of the Outfit.

"I'd like to talk to you if that's okay."

She looked at Leo, who regarded her like a ticking time bomb. Then she stepped back and nodded. She left the door open and moved inside. We followed her into a living room. The TV was playing. She sank down in front of it. An ironing board and a heap of crumpled clothes stood off to the side.

I moved closer to her. Leo stopped right behind us. His hovering was unnerving. She looked like someone who struggled with grief and perhaps even depression but not like she would attack me, at least not physically. She met my gaze eventually.

“Samuel misses Domenico too, and I know he’s very sorry.” Leo made a sound that suggested it wasn’t something I should say. Was it really so bad if a man, even one with power, admitted that he was sorry for something like this? “I just thought you should know. I know that doesn’t bring your son back, but Samuel never meant for any of this to happen.”

“Everyone moves on with their lives, even my husband and son. Everyone can except for Domenico and me.”

I nodded. For a mother to lose her child in this way must have been horrible. It was probably impossible to move on from that. “I don’t know if it would help you, but maybe forgiveness would make some things easier.”

She let out a hollow laugh. “Forgiveness? Did you forgive the man who cost you your legs?” She motioned at my wheelchair.

I didn’t correct her that I still had my legs. I smiled. “I did, eventually.”

“He paid with his life for what he did. Forgiving a dead man is easy because he can’t flaunt his happiness in front of you anymore.”

“I would have forgiven him even if he were alive. His death didn’t change my situation.” I never asked Danilo or Dad to kill him, and I wouldn’t have. His death didn’t change anything for me, except for knowing that in addition to my suffering, his family now grieved too. “Is that what you desire? Samuel’s death?”

My voice broke slightly. I was falling for Samuel a little more every day. Maybe I even loved him, and I wanted to see him fully happy. Thinking that someone other than our enemies wanted him dead hurt my heart.

Her eyes glazed over in thought. “Sometimes,” she admitted. “I wish he had died and not my boy.”

I nodded. I understood that too.

She looked up at Leo, who was typing on his phone. “Is that betrayal? You can tell him exactly what I said. I would tell him and his father to their faces. They can kill me if they want, then I’d finally be united with my boy again!”

Leo frowned at her as he lowered his phone, but he didn’t say anything.

I realized she would never give Samuel her forgiveness. That would require her to move on, and she would never allow herself to do so. For her, it would feel like betraying the child she'd lost.

I squeezed her hand. "I don't understand your pain. Nobody who hasn't experienced it can, but I am sorry for your loss. I know the things we lose always echo the loudest."

She swallowed hard and nodded.

Samuel came home early that day, and one look at his tense face as he stepped outside on the porch where I was doing origami told me that Leo had told him everything. Not that I had expected anything less. Samuel probably always got a detailed rundown of my day. I wasn't sure if it was concern or his need to control everything.

"That was very foolish," he said quietly.

His quiet rage was always the most potent. I sat up straighter and put the origami flower down. Giorgia had asked me to do them for her wedding as table decorations for their wedding gift. "If wanting to help my husband makes me a fool, then I don't mind being one."

Samuel shook his head and squatted before me with a look of intense frustration. "Do you realize how much danger you were in?"

"I visited a mother who's caught up in grief and depression, not the enemy."

"Grief can turn men into monsters."

"Men, certainly. She's a woman."

Samuel glared. "This isn't the time to be witty. What if she'd decided to pay me back and hurt me by hurting or killing you, Emma? Did you consider that?"

"Leo was with me. And killing me wouldn't have hurt you in a way she might desire. For her to have any chance of getting even, she would have to kill someone you love, like your mother or Sofia. Not me, because you

don’t love me.” The words ached, but I didn’t shy back from a hurtful truth. I never had.

Samuel regarded me without saying anything.

“Right?” I whispered, and I wasn’t sure why I did it.

Samuel straightened and looked out over the lake. “I told you she won’t forgive me.”

“She can’t because she would feel guilty. It isn’t even about you anymore. It’s about her feeling obligated to stay in the past and not move on like everyone else.”

“I want to move on, now more than ever, because of you.” He looked me in the eyes, and the look in his made my heart speed up. Samuel wasn’t a man for emotional declarations, but this felt like one.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Giorgia was a stunning bride. Her sweetheart neckline accentuated her showstopper cleavage, and her copper hair contrasted beautifully with the white of her dress.

Renato's expression was more than appreciative as he took her in, and definitely not fit for church.

I rolled my eyes, annoyed. Samuel squeezed my hand, and I slanted him a look. "Maybe she can get him in line," he said under his breath as the priest continued the ceremony.

"Made Men can be extremely set in their ways."

Samuel let out a low chuckle and raised my hand to his lips to kiss my knuckles. The gesture, in public no less, surprised me. "You would know all about it."

"Indeed," I whispered, then turned back to the front of the church to watch Renato and Giorgia exchange their vows. During the congratulations in front of the church, my eyes briefly drifted to Fiorentino and his father. While the boy gave me a brief smile, still thankful for my help, his father

pointedly ignored me. He was furious because my “meddling” had led to his son being a part of the Outfit.

Afterward, we gathered in a massive ballroom in one of the best hotels in Minneapolis. Giorgia’s mother had picked it because of its sheer size, as she’d invited pretty much everyone she knew.

“Giorgia was worried you’d be mad because their wedding has more guests than ours,” I whispered. Because I was Giorgia’s maid of honor and Samuel was Renato's best manSamuel was Renato's best manSamuel was Renato's best man, we shared a table with their families.

“A man who worries about losing face because his friend has a bigger wedding has already lost.”

I smiled, pleased that Samuel shared my opinion.

“Let me guess: your mother was enraged about the insolence.”

I giggled. “Of course. She’ll be offended for a while.”

Samuel shook his head with a wry smile and took a sip from the champagne.

After dinner, Giorgia and Renato had their dance. I smiled as I watched them, even if Giorgia’s red face told me her husband had said something very naughty. I really hoped she’d manage to rein him in.

When the dance floor opened for the rest of the guests, Samuel rose from his chair and held his hand to me. “Will you give me the honor of a dance?”

I bit my lip with a nod. I took his hand and followed along until we reached the edge of the dance floor. This time, I managed not to roll over Samuel’s feet.

“No bruised feet this time,” he said.

I flushed. “Did you have bruises? I didn’t pay attention to your feet on our wedding night.”

“That’s right. You usually get distracted by the upper half of my body.”

My face grew hot. I looked around at the guests to see if anyone had heard the comment, but the music was too loud. “Samuel.”

He chuckled, obviously amused by my embarrassment.

“Don’t pretend you care about my feet.”

“They look good in heels, so I sometimes look at them,” he said.

The song ended. I licked my lips. “Could we do a dance with me in your arms like at our wedding?”

Samuel bent down and picked me up, then pushed the wheelchair to the side with his foot. I wrapped my arms around his neck, bringing us closer as he began to sway to the music. Our gazes locked, and I smiled at how different this dance felt compared to the one at our wedding. We had been strangers back then, and now we weren't.

I felt comfortable in Samuel's arms, safe and at home, and I realized this was the first social event where I had thoroughly enjoyed myself.

"I'm really enjoying myself. You are like my personal shield that keeps away the negative energy."

Samuel's lips twitched into a brief smile before the aloof expression he usually had in public returned. "I'm glad you feel that way. I want to shield you from all the darkness in our world."

I kissed his cheek, but he turned his head and pressed a kiss to my lips. When this song ended, Samuel and I returned to the table. Giorgia was there, talking to her mother and new mother-in-law. She sent me a pleading look. "Can I kidnap Giorgia for a moment?"

"Of course," Giorgia's mom said. Samuel leaned down to me. "You leave me here with these two gossipmongers?"

"Sorry. I need you to shield me from their negativity," I teased.

"I feel tempted to spank you for this, but you'd enjoy it."

My cheeks burst with heat, and I quickly followed Giorgia, who sent me a questioning look. We crossed the room toward the double doors.

Samuel too escaped the table, obviously not in the mood to chat with the "gossipmongers." His words about spanking echoed in my mind.

"I'm not sure I want to know what goes on in your head," Giorgia said as we arrived in the empty hallway.

"Samuel just said something…" I shook my head with an embarrassed smile.

"Everyone could see you two were into each other when you danced. It was really sweet. I'm so happy that things are working out for you."

I took Giorgia's hand. She was quieter and more withdrawn than her usual perky self. "I hope you'll find happiness. Renato can count himself lucky to have you as his wife."

"Oh, he should definitely count himself lucky, but he only thinks about ways he can get lucky tonight." She rolled her eyes.

I laughed. "Don't make it too easy for him."

“I won’t, trust me.”

The Miones had invited my mother, Danilo, and Sofia to celebrate Christmas with us in their mansion. I was excited to have my brother with me for the festivities. I’d never celebrated Christmas without him and hoped it would stay that way.

Danilo and Sofia stayed in a hotel around the corner from the Mione mansion, not taking us up on our offer to sleep in one of the guest rooms. Danilo probably wasn’t too keen on being under the same roof as Samuel or Pietro.

Samuel and I arrived at his parents’ late in the afternoon on Christmas Eve. They also lived in the Lake of the Isles neighborhood with a beautiful lake view. Their mansion was built at the beginning of the 20th century and not newly built like our home.

When Samuel and I entered the mansion’s entryway, my eyes grew wide. Beside the old wooden staircase that led to the first floor was a new elevator. It looked like an alien amid the last century decor. I gaped at Ines and Pietro, then peered up at Samuel. “Did you know?”

He nodded with a small smile. “The same elevator company that did the one in our house installed this.”

I was incredibly touched by the gesture. I moved over to Ines and took her hand. “You really didn’t have to do this. This doesn’t match your house’s historic decor.”

Ines let out a small laugh. “We want you to feel at home here, and that requires you to be able to access every part of this mansion. Would you like to try it out?”

I nodded and pressed the button that opened the doors. It was a tube-shaped elevator, with just enough room for my wheelchair and another person. I rode to the first floor, then back down again and grinned. “It’s perfect, thank you!”

The doorbell rang, and Pietro opened the door for Danilo, Mom, and Sofia. They had just arrived today, so I hadn't seen them yet.

After greeting Ines and Pietro, Mom immediately came toward Samuel and me. She gave him a dazzling smile before she pulled him into an enthusiastic hug. Danilo gave me a look that almost made me burst out laughing. After hugging Mom, too, I moved toward Danilo to give Mom some time to schmooze Samuel, as she seemed very intent on doing. "At least Mom shows some enthusiasm about her new family."

Danilo bent down and hugged me. "If I hugged your husband like that, he'd kick my ass. Neither of us are into public displays of affection, and my affection is still limited with him."

I pursed my lips. "You should try to like him. He's my husband."

"Is he a good one? Then I might consider it."

"Are you a good husband?"

Danilo glanced at Sofia, who stood beside Ines with an arm wrapped around her. Something in his gaze had definitely changed since I'd last seen those two, and when she looked back at him, I realized the same could be said for her eyes. "I think you're doing better."

Danilo sent me a stern look, but I merely smiled. Samuel came to my side, probably worried Danilo was asking too many questions about him.

We finally moved into the living room, where a huge real fir illuminated the room with dozens of real candles on its branches. Dinner was delicious, but I was utterly stuffed after four courses. Danilo and Sofia excused themselves for a short walk along the lake while Ines went upstairs to look for the photo albums she wanted to show us. Pietro disappeared into their wine cellar to look for a special drink for the occasion.

Samuel and I went out into the garden to enjoy some fresh air and solitude. I sucked in a deep breath. It was bitterly cold outside. Samuel shrugged out of his jacket and draped it over me.

"Your brother is practically undressing my sister with his eyes," Samuel muttered as he released my shoulders after a moment.

I stifled laughter. "Sofia did the same, you know?" It had been quite embarrassing and endearing at the same time. I hoped I never looked at Samuel like that, considering I felt the same strong pull toward him that Sofia felt toward my brother. I tried not to think about it too much.

Samuel looked as if he'd chewed something very bitter. "I feel very tempted to leer at you the remainder of the evening just to spite Danilo."

I laughed. "That's horrible and childish." I pursed my lips. "And I don't want you to leer at me for any other reason than because you feel like it."

Samuel cupped my chin and tilted my head up, then braced himself on my wheelchair with his other hand, bringing our faces very close together. "Trust me, Emma, I always want to undress you with my eyes and my hands, but unlike your brother, I have an ounce of decency and won't do it around my parents."

I rolled my eyes. Danilo and Samuel were like cats and dogs. Samuel pressed his lips against mine. "Especially when you disrespect me like this, I want to kiss some sense into you."

I gave him a doubtful look, though I had to admit that his kisses definitely wreaked havoc on my senses. He deepened the kiss, his tongue demanding as it teased me. I knew someone could come out at any moment, but I simply couldn't find the strength to end our kiss. Samuel tasted of the red wine that he'd drunk, tart with a hint of berries. Soon, my skin was flushed, and my lap felt hot. Samuel got down on his knees and pressed his face in my lap with a groan. "I want nothing more than to eat you right here."

I tugged at his hair. The pressure of his face against where I ached for him and the additional heat almost drove me insane. But we couldn't do anything in his parents' house. That would be uncouth, as Samuel would put it. Samuel looked up, and I knew we'd be in trouble. "Don't," I whispered, but it sounded half-hearted.

Samuel raised his brows. "Don't what?" His low voice sent a shiver down my back. He reached one hand under my dress, stroking along the lacy top of my stockings before he pushed two fingers into my panties, finding me damp.

His eyes challenged me. "Don't what?"

The alcohol had definitely lowered his inhibitions. I wished I had the same excuse, but my body simply ached for his touch.

Steps sounded. My eyes widened in anxiety. Samuel quickly extracted his fingers from under my skirt, pushed them into his mouth to lick them clean, and straightened just when Ines appeared behind the window and raised four thick photo albums with a delighted expression on her face.

I quickly excused myself to the bathroom to freshen up before I returned to the living room. Danilo, Samuel, and Pietro were already tasting some expensive port.

Samuel's eyes locked on mine, and a new wave of heat rushed through my body. I tore my gaze away as I moved toward Sofia and Ines, who sat at the coffee table with one of the photo albums open in front of them.

The men quickly excused themselves to Pietro's office, obviously not in the mood to take a stroll down memory lane. It was quite late when Samuel decided it was time to head home, and that was when the atmosphere became uncomfortable.

"Can one of your men drive Sofia and me to our hotel?" Danilo asked Pietro. "I don't drink and drive since Emma's accident."

Pietro nodded. "That seems wise."

Danilo sent Samuel a hard look. "What about you? I'm sure your father can also spare another man to drive you home."

Samuel narrowed his eyes at my brother.

"You could spend the night here," Ines said with a disarming smile at Samuel. "Then we could spend Christmas morning together."

We were invited for lunch anyway. "That sounds wonderful," I said quickly. I didn't want to stab Samuel in the back by expressing my unease of having him drive us home in his state. He didn't have any outward signs of being drunk, but I doubted the men had held back while they chatted in Pietro's office. Samuel was confident in his abilities, but I didn't want to tempt fate, not after my accident.

"Your present is at our house," Samuel said.

"We can exchange presents later. I don't mind."

Samuel looked into my eyes for a while, then gave a terse nod. "Why not?"

Danilo gave me a small nod, obviously pleased with the outcome. I sent him a warning look. A comment from him might provoke Samuel again.

When Samuel and I lay in bed a short while later in the dark, he murmured, "You trust your brother's judgment more than mine."

I tensed. He was pressed up behind my back, and in the dark, I wouldn't have had a chance to make out his expression anyway. "I trust you," I said. "But I don't trust the alcohol, especially not when it comes to driving. A drunk driver almost killed me, Samuel."

“I know,” Samuel rumbled, then pressed a kiss to my neck. “That’s why I agreed to spend the night here.”

When I entered the ballet studio in my tutu, I immediately relaxed despite my previous tension. Samuel and I had had an argument in the morning because I’d found him in his office again. He had fallen asleep at his desk with a half-empty bottle of liquor beside him. For the first couple of weeks after Christmas, it had seemed like he was drinking much less, but maybe he’d simply gotten better at hiding it from me. The thought worried me tremendously. I touched the gold necklace of an origami crane that Samuel had given me for Christmas and took a deep breath.

Dancing had become my new reprieve. In the past, it had been a source of pressure and anxiety for me, so I’d never missed it as much as I thought I would, but now freed of expectations, I had rediscovered my love for ballet.

Our dance teacher and Albert were already there and caught up in a conversation. Leo sank down on the bench in the hallway, right in front of the door to the studio as he’d done the last few times. By now, everyone had grown used to him being there, and I didn’t feel like an alien among them anymore.

Albert smiled when he spotted me and waved me over to him and Natalya. “Natalya and I think we should try a lifting figure today. You are a natural, and it would be amazing.”

My eyes grew wide with surprise. In the past, lifts had always been my favorite, giving me a sense of freedom.

“What do you think?” Natalya asked, pushing one hand into her waist, her fingers tapping against her belly.

Usually, I would have said no. A lift always meant more closeness than other dance figures, and I had a feeling Samuel wouldn’t like that, considering his jealous reactions before. For a Made Man, jealousy was a matter of outward appearances and showing their dominance, not love. But

Albert was so obviously not interested in me and women in general that I doubted even the most possessive man would find fault in a lifting figure. “Uhhh. We could try.”

“Wonderful!” Albert touched my shoulder, looking giddy like a child. I stifled a smile at his excitement. It was obvious that ballet was his absolute passion. The other dancers filed in, greeting me with honest smiles. I was so glad that I had found a place among them despite my notorious background.

Natalya clapped her hands. “Time to begin. Today, we’re working on a few new moves.”

After a warm-up, Natalya explained to everyone what she expected of them. I was nervous about our lift as it required me to push halfway out of my wheelchair in a fluid motion so Albert could pick me up, then raise me and twirl me around.

The first take went completely wrong. I pushed up too quickly, and Albert couldn’t grab my waist properly, so I plopped back into the wheelchair with enough force to make it shake violently.

Leo rose from the bench, but I quickly shook my head. Even if I fell, that was part of the process. I didn’t want him to intervene and remind my fellow dancers of my otherness.

“I’m sorry,” Albert spluttered, his face turning red under my bodyguard’s foreboding scrutiny. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

In the mafia world, I was different because of my wheelchair. Here, among fellow dancers with disabilities, I was different because of my background. I simply wanted to belong. Danilo had made me feel that way in the past, and on occasion, when I managed to break through Samuel’s cold shield, especially when we were intimate, he made me feel that way too. But now that he was building another barrier between us because he wanted to hide his alcohol consumption from me, I feared growing closer emotionally was a fight against windmills.

“Ready to try again?” Natalya asked.

I nodded. The timing was better this time, and Albert lifted me out of my wheelchair. I raised my arms over my head and tried to tense my legs as much as I could so my feet were pointy. Most lifting figures required tension in your legs and feet, so we had to modify them to work with my

body's abilities. Albert, too, couldn't keep me up as long because of his stiff leg.

I grinned when Albert put me down in my wheelchair again. We tried the figure a few more times before we were confident enough to add it to our dance routine.

After our first completed routine, I couldn't stop smiling, even as I felt out of breath. My body had to grow used to this level of exertion again, but I could already tell it was improving my overall posture.

"Oh," Albert gasped at the same time as a hush fell over my fellow dancers. I followed their gazes toward the door, and my eyes grew wide in surprise. Samuel stood in the doorway.

"Dammit. I've never been into bad boys, but your husband could change my mind," Albert whispered under his breath.

I couldn't stop the laugh from bursting out of me.

Samuel's intent, cool gaze slid from Albert to me. Albert sobered and quickly excused himself, putting some distance between us.

Natalya touched my shoulder. "I suppose you have to leave now."

I nodded. I hadn't known that Samuel would pick me up, but I could tell he wanted me to come with him.

"I hope to one day find someone who looks at me the way he looked at you while you danced," Natalya said. "That kind of adoration is rare."

I frowned. I wasn't sure what she saw, but knowing Samuel, I simply couldn't believe he'd allowed himself to feel that kind of emotion in public.

I moved over to him. "I didn't know you were coming," I said with a small smile.

"I should have come sooner," he said simply, his gaze moving to Albert once more.

"He's gay, okay? And he's very nice," I said quickly.

Samuel gave me a small smile. "I know he's gay. I had my men do a background check on everyone."

I shouldn't have been surprised. "He finds you very attractive. He said you could make him fall for the bad-boy type."

Samuel touched my shoulder and gently steered me out into the hallway. His brows drew together. "Then he's not so different from some women who fancy the bad boy in bed because they don't know the baggage that comes with this life."

He grabbed my gym bag from the locker room, then opened the front door for me.

“I should change clothes,” I said, confused.

Samuel shook his head. He pushed me down the ramp to his car parked right outside and lifted me out of the wheelchair. “Stay as you are.”

The look in his eyes and the low timbre of his words melted my insides. I blushed when I realized what Samuel had in mind.

“Does my ballet attire turn you on?” I asked with a teasing smile when Samuel didn’t put me down in the seat right away.

He lowered me into the seat but stayed bent over me. His eyes were practically devouring me whole. “You always turn me on, but right now, all I can think about is to claim your pussy in that tutu you’re wearing.” His lips claimed mine for a fierce kiss before he straightened and closed the door. The taste of whisky lingered on my lips from his kiss.

My belly tightened with apprehension, but I didn’t want to say anything and cause a repeat performance of the fight in the morning.

Samuel started the car the moment he was behind the wheel and raced away.

He took my hand as he drove us home. My body already rang with desire. It was still early, much earlier than Samuel’s usual time to return home from work.

The moment we pulled up in front of the house, Samuel shoved open the door and raced around the hood. He picked me up and carried me inside, then kicked the front door shut. Instead of carrying me upstairs, he turned and pressed my back against the door, then kissed me hard. He ground his cock between my legs, showing me how much I turned him on. I gasped into his mouth, delirious from his touch and his obvious hunger for me. He dry humped me as we kissed almost desperately. I could feel myself getting closer and closer. Samuel straightened suddenly and stumbled into his office with me in his arms. He set me on his desk, then swiped all the folders and sheets off the surface with one sweeping motion. I laughed, feeling almost lightheaded with desire. He pushed me down until I splayed on his desk, my legs spread because he stood between them.

His eyes raked over me. “Fuck.” He knelt and pushed up my skirt, then kissed my pussy through my leotard. I wasn’t wearing tights, only blush-colored ballet ankle warmers because it was always very warm in the

studio. The leotard was quite tight and not easy to move to the side. Samuel let out a growl as he tried to push it to the side to eat me.

“I’ll have to pull it down,” I whispered between giggles and moans.

“No time,” he growled and unsheathed a knife from his chest. He cut through the fabric of my leotard and panties.

“Samuel!” I gasped in shock, but his mouth pressed against my pussy, and I lost the ability to speak.

I came not long after but never got time to catch my breath because Samuel ripped down his zipper and pulled out his cock. He gripped my hips and looked at me full of hunger and possessiveness as he pushed into me in one hard thrust.

His eyes fell shut, and I released a long moan at the stretched sensation. I could feel every nerve ending in my pussy. Samuel opened his eyes and surprised me when he bent forward and cupped my head, his thumbs stroking along my temple gently. He slid out of me gradually, only to glide back in even slower. His eyes locked on mine as he moved unhurriedly, his lips close but not touching mine. I couldn’t look away. This felt more intimate than ever before, as if Samuel was trying to convey something with his eyes.

I remembered Natalya’s words and wondered if she’d really seen what she described. If Samuel felt more for me than he could admit. “You are amazing,” he rasped as he made love to me.

God, this felt like making love. Was it?

Could this really be love?

Emma searched my eyes, hoping to find proof of deeper feelings in them. Fuck, and I was so tired of hiding my feelings, so fucking tired of keeping her at arms' length when I wanted her close, closer than I'd ever wanted someone.

I wanted to protect her, but she was already too deeply involved in my problems as it was. And so for the first time since I'd married Emma, and the first time in a very long time, I lowered my guard and allowed someone to see beyond my cold mask. I allowed Emma to see what I felt for her. Emotions I couldn't put into words yet. Sometimes I wanted to have her as close as possible, and sometimes, particularly when she commented about my drinking, I wanted to push her far away.

Tears welled in her eyes, and her breathing hitched. She opened her mouth to say what I couldn't say because her eyes had screamed her feelings for me for a while. I kissed her to silence her, then murmured. "No words, Emma. Not now, not yet. Let me be the first to say them. Soon, I'll be ready."

She nodded and swallowed hard.

"Until then, let me show you what I feel."

I made love to Emma until we both found release, then I sat back in my desk chair and pulled her on my lap.

She snuggled against me and touched my heart. "I'm glad you finally trust me enough."

I brushed her hair away from her face. “It’s not a matter of trusting you. I simply want to protect you from certain aspects of me.”

Emma sat up. “Samuel, I’m not blind. I’m not stupid. I know you’re struggling, and it doesn’t lessen my feelings for you. You’re human. It’s okay not to always be okay.”

I cupped her cheek. “I’ll be Underboss soon. The men I’ll rule over don’t want their leader to be human, Emma. They want someone who appears bigger than life, someone who makes them believe he’s worth dying for. I’m a symbol, and that symbol can’t have cracks. I’m not the only one with a dark past or problems, but I’ll have to make sure nobody knows.”

She pursed her lips. “I know your men expect you to be strong, but emotions don’t make you weak. Even Dante showed emotions after his first wife died. He was in mourning.”

“For a short while and it never stopped him from being cruelly effective in his job. I lost friends and a twin. That’s not the same as losing a wife.”

She sighed. “I understand being strong for your men, but I’m your wife. I swore to be by your side in good and in bad times, so let me be there for you.”

I brushed a strand from her sweaty forehead. “It’s my job to protect you.”

Her expression darkened. “Yes, and it’s my job to take care of you. Let me help you. Don’t push me away, don’t keep me out. That hurts me more than your problems ever could.”

I kissed her. “I’ll try. I’m used to keeping people out, so this will be new for me.”

She smiled slightly. “That’s okay. I’ll hold you accountable, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Maybe it would be a good start to talk about your drinking.”

I tensed, my defensive walls jumping into place. “I drink often. You’re right.”

“Every day,” Emma said quietly.

I gritted my teeth. “How would you know?”

“Because I can smell it on you, Samuel. I thought you wanted to confide in me?”

I sighed, not liking feeling cornered like that. I felt the strong desire to lock her out again and raise my protective walls. “I don’t keep track, but you could be right. I have been drinking a bit more than I should in recent months.”

Emma nodded, her eyes soft and understanding.

“Alcohol kept me company and listened when I couldn’t open up to anyone else. Now that I have you to confide in, that won’t be an issue anymore.”

Emma gave me a small, hopeful smile, but I could tell she wasn’t quite convinced. Neither was I, but I had survived torture and several attempts on my life. Alcohol really wasn’t an opponent I was worried about.

“My father asked me about children today,” I said. “After the thing with Serafina, he’s always concerned something could happen to me too. I suppose he needs to make sure our bloodline continues.”

Emma regarded me with wide eyes. “Okay.” She tilted her head curiously. “Your mom got really emotional over photos of you, Serafina, and Sofia as babies. Maybe that’s why he feels like grandchildren would be good, to cheer up your mom, you know?”

I nodded. “She’s made peace with having lost Serafina, but sometimes it catches up with her again. That’s why I knew it was a bad idea to look at those photos. Are you still against kids?”

She frowned. “I was never against having kids, Samuel. I’m just worried. Do you want children now because it’s expected of us?”

I sighed. Of course, it was expected of us. “It’s expected, but that’s not why I want children.”

“Then why do you want them?”

“Family is the only place in our world where you can really be yourself.”

Emma bit her lip, her eyes warm and loving. “I know. With you, I don’t feel different. I just feel like me because you only see me.”

I cupped her cheeks. “I feel the same with you.” I knew I still wasn’t the epitome of emotionally available, but I wanted to let Emma in.

“I want children. I have always dreamed of having my own family one day. For a long time, I didn’t dare dream it could become a reality,” Emma whispered. She searched my eyes. “Do you want them now?”

I shrugged. I wasn't sure if it was the right time for kids yet, but would there ever be a right time? Getting Emma pregnant would definitely get some people off our backs, and maybe it would help me focus on the present and not let the past catch up with me so often. Perhaps it would help get a better handle on my drinking habits too. Emma was right. They had become a little erratic over time.

"I think you should stop taking the pill, and we should let fate decide if we're ready for kids."

Emma blew out a breath, her eyes nervous. "Okay. I only have five more pills, and I won't start the new prescription after that."

I wrapped my arms around her tightly, my heart speeding up. I knew this was a monumental step that would change everything, even more than a marriage had.

"Can you try to drink less if we do this? Not during the day and maybe not every day?" Her face filled with anxiety over my reaction, and my first instinct was to get angry because I didn't want anyone to tell me what to do, but in this case, I understood Emma's reasoning.

"I'll drink less, don't worry."

Emma was concerned I had lost control over my drinking, but I would show her that I never relinquished control.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

For our first wedding anniversary, Samuel and I decided to head out to the Mione lake lodge about two hours outside of Minneapolis. I had never been there, only at the Cavallaro lodge, but that had been years ago.

The wooden lodge sat tight on the edge of the lake without any other houses in sight. Across the lake, I spotted another similar lodge, but apart from that, the location provided solitude.

I was equally excited and nervous about our trip. My period was overdue by five days, but I hadn't dared take a test yet. The last two times I'd been overdue by a day and tested, the result had been negative. I didn't want to get my hopes up again. Samuel and I had been only trying for six months, so I knew it was still early, and I couldn't expect to become pregnant right away. I had packed three pregnancy tests but wasn't sure if I should really take them. If they were negative, that would overshadow our trip, and I really wanted to enjoy our anniversary.

"You're very quiet," Samuel said as he helped me into my wheelchair. A ramp led up to the porch that went around the house.

I smiled at him. "That's usually your part."

He chuckled. “It is, which is why I notice when you don’t talk to me.”

“I’m fine, really. Just thinking about the upcoming fundraiser I’m organizing with Priest Agnello.”

Samuel checked our surroundings with a vigilant expression, then keyed in the code so the door of the lodge opened. “Let me know if you need additional help or if it would help if I showed my face at the fundraiser. I want you to succeed.”

I moved inside. “Your face always convinces people to do things.”

Samuel chuckled as he turned and headed toward our car to grab our bags. It smelled freshly cleaned, and a huge bouquet of white-and-blush-colored roses sat on the big kitchen island. A similar bouquet had waited for me this morning on the dining room table, but we hadn’t exchanged gifts yet and would do it after dinner. I smiled as I scanned the big window front overlooking the lake. Samuel came in with our luggage and carried it into the only bedroom on the lower floor. Next, he carried in a cooler with the meat and fish he wanted to put on the barbecue for us tonight and tomorrow. I loved this down-to-earth side of Samuel. He’d hunted the meat himself a few months ago during a trip with his dad. Whenever he barbecued meat, he seemed the most relaxed.

A few bottles of red wine sat on the kitchen counter, and in the fridge, I found my favorite white wine, a Pecorino, my favorite Italian grape at the moment. Samuel probably expected that we’d have a glass of wine tonight for dinner.

I bit my lip. I couldn’t drink until I knew I wasn’t pregnant. Maybe Samuel would suspect something if I didn’t drink anything on our anniversary, even if I’d reduced my intake in the past few months very drastically because of our wish to have a baby.

Samuel too had reduced his alcohol consumption at home, but I wasn’t sure if he simply drank more when he was at work. He often smelled of spearmint chewing gum when he came home. I wanted to believe him, but I knew addiction was a difficult opponent, even if Samuel seemed reluctant to see his alcohol consumption as problematic.

I decided not to take the test right away. I wanted to enjoy the evening without disappointment. Samuel began to prepare the deer steaks and scallops for our main course of surf and turf, while I took care of the

creamy polenta and salad that would go with it. For dessert, Samuel and I decided to enjoy the macarons that Anna had sent us from Paris as a gift.

Samuel and I had dinner on the porch in the candlelight. It was warm enough, and the serenity of the lake was marvelous. When Samuel offered me a glass of wine, I shook my head. “I feel tired from the drive. If I drink now, I’ll just fall asleep, and I don’t want that on our anniversary.”

“I don’t want that either,” Samuel said with a suggestive smile as he took a sip from his wine.

After dinner, we settled on the hammock facing the lake, and I indulged in the macarons while Samuel enjoyed a digestif. I tried not to pay attention to how much he was drinking because I didn’t want it to overshadow our trip. We linked hands and sat in silence, my head on Samuel’s shoulder, for over an hour. I loved these moments of peaceful quiet when neither of us felt the need for idle chitchat.

“How about we exchange gifts now?” Samuel asked as he pulled a small box from behind his back.

“Let me get mine,” I said.

Samuel got up. “Let me. Where is it?”

“On the kitchen island.”

He returned a couple of minutes later with the long, narrow package.

“You first,” I said.

Samuel opened his gift, and his eyes lit up with awe. I bought a custom-made hunting knife for Samuel with a mammoth tooth for the handle and Samuel’s initials carved into it. “This is beautiful. I’ll take it with me for the hunting trip with your brother, Leonas, and my dad.”

I smiled, glad he loved it.

Samuel bent forward and kissed me. “This is the best gift I ever got.”

He held the small box out to me. “Your turn.”

I took the box and unwrapped it, then opened it. My lips parted. It was a delicate gold bracelet with a ballet shoe pendant studded with small diamonds. Samuel helped me put it on. “It’s beautiful.” I leaned forward and kissed Samuel.

Our kisses quickly became heated. Samuel got down on his knees in front of me, lifted my skirt, and ate me out. I raked my fingers through his hair as his tongue and lips teased me to my first orgasm with a beautiful view of the dark lake.

I was still panting when Samuel picked me up and carried me inside. He kicked down a few cushions and blankets, then put me down on the floor in front of the big window before he got out of his clothes and covered my body with his. He held my gaze as he entered me slowly and didn't speed up as he kissed me.

This felt like making love again. Sometimes Samuel and I were hungry and urgent, and that was when we fucked, but sometimes our touches were loaded with emotions that Samuel never put into words, and I didn't either because he wanted to be the first.

Afterward, Samuel stayed in me, my face cradled in his palms. The look in his eyes made my throat feel tight. "It's hard for me to put words to my feelings. Loving someone gives them power over you."

I ran my hands through his hair. I supposed with his experience of betrayal from when his twin ran away with Remo Falcone, love really seemed like a risk.

"Do you think your feelings will become stronger if you admit to them?" I asked softly.

"No," Samuel murmured. "I don't think they can."

I bit my lip. I wanted to say it, wanted to show Samuel that sometimes it took a leap of faith. Samuel touched my lips. "Me first."

I waited, and he lowered his head and brushed his lips over my ear. "I love you, Emma."

I swallowed thickly before I whispered, "I love you, Samuel."

Samuel buried his face in my neck, and for a while, neither of us said anything. My body had felt tired before, but now I doubted I could fall asleep anytime soon.

After a while, I needed to pee, so I wiggled. "I need to go to the bathroom."

Samuel pushed up with a groan and plopped back on his back. I cocked my eyebrow. With a grin, he pushed to his feet and got my wheelchair from the porch.

Once I was in the bathroom, I hesitated. Maybe now was the time to be brave. I opened my toilet bag and pulled out a pregnancy test.

After I'd peed on it, I put it down on the counter and waited.

"Emma? You've been in there for a while. Are you okay?"

I took a deep breath. "It's not locked. You can come in."

Samuel opened the door and peered in cautiously. He scanned me, then his eyes landed on the pregnancy test on the counter. His eyes widened. “Are you?”

“I don’t know. I’m overdue.”

Samuel moved closer, almost cautiously, and touched my shoulder.

“I’m scared it’s negative.”

“We haven’t been trying for long,” he said.

“I know, but this time, it really feels like I’m pregnant, and I know I’ll be disappointed if I’m not.”

I glanced at my watch. It was time. I picked up the pregnancy test, and my face burst into a smile.

Pregnant.

My heart hammered in my chest when Emma picked up the test. I wasn’t sure what I was seeing. I had absolutely no clue about pregnancy tests. The only time I’d witnessed someone taking a test had been with Serafina, but back then, I’d been so shocked that I hadn’t paid attention at all.

“I’m pregnant,” Emma whispered, tears filling her eyes.

I blew out the breath I hadn’t even realized I was holding. I stared down at the test, then back at Emma’s stunned face.

“Are you happy?”

I nodded and bent down, kissing her cheek and lips. “I am. I’m also a little shocked. I don’t know why.”

I felt a million things all at once. We had been trying for months, but this was the first time it really sank in. We’d become parents. I’d become a father with a whole new set of responsibilities and another person, a small baby, to protect.

“I am too. Shocked, I mean, and happy and scared. Maybe even terrified.” I pulled back a little and looked at Emma’s widened eyes. “Are we ready to become parents?”

I chuckled. “I think we have to be.”

Emma nodded, then looked back down at the test. “Oh wow.” On the one hand, seeing Emma’s shock and nervousness was consoling, but on the other hand, it made me realize that we’d both be thrown into this.

I took her hand and kissed it. “You’ll be a great mom. You love to take care of people.”

“I thought you didn’t like it when I mothered you,” Emma said with a teasing smile.

“Sometimes I don’t, and sometimes I do, but I’m sure a baby will love it.”

She giggled, then shook her head again. I picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. After laying her on the mattress, I stretched out beside her, pulling her close.

In many regards, I would have to do even better in the future. Emma needed me now more than ever. I hadn’t been completely honest with her regarding my alcohol consumption. I had tried to drink far less, but it had proven challenging, so I’d mostly drunk at work or at night when Emma had been asleep.

Now that she had to take care of the baby growing inside her, I could confide in her even less. I didn’t want her to worry. This was my personal battle, and I was determined to win.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Admitting to addiction meant weakness in the eyes of a Made Man. It made me furious. This was simple physics. Even if they considered themselves stronger than other people, they were still bound to nature's laws, and their bodies craved whatever drug they were addicted to. Maybe their strength made it easier for them to resist, but perhaps it made it harder because they never sought help.

Seeing Samuel struggle with his demons alone, thinking he needed to do it alone, broke my heart. I wanted to help him, but I wasn't sure how. Should I set an ultimatum? Should I put a virtual barrel to his head?

I touched my bump. I needed to do something for our baby's sake. For Samuel's sake. For our family's sake.

Maybe I had been foolish to think that my pregnancy would give Samuel the push he needed to stop drinking, but it had only made him more secretive when it came to his consumption. Maybe he thought I didn't notice how often he snuck down to his office at night or how he had an array of chewing gum and even mouthwash in his car and probably his

office. But his office was always locked nowadays. I hadn't cornered him about it yet, still foolishly hoping things would solve themselves.

In December, I finally gathered my courage. There were only three more months until my due date, and I knew time was running out if we wanted to tackle Samuel's problem before that.

Samuel and I had dinner together like every evening. Samuel had his usual glass of wine, never more, at least not in my presence, but I'd smelled the hint of alcohol on him when he'd returned earlier. My sense of smell had improved over the course of my pregnancy, so it was almost impossible to keep something like that from me.

"I know you're drinking when you're not home," I said quietly.

Samuel's expression darkened. "Emma—"

"What if you're intoxicated when I go into labor?"

His gaze slid down to my prominent bump. "I could still drive you, and I'll stop drinking once your due date is close."

Did he really think it was as easy as that? That he could just decide when to stop?

"What if the baby comes early? Or what if it comes many days after the due date? Can you stay away from drinking for weeks? Do you really think it works like that?"

"I'm not an alcoholic, Emma. I like a drink or two, especially on stressful days, but that doesn't mean I have a problem."

So that's where we were at? Back to complete denial? I wasn't sure what to do. Deep down, I knew I couldn't leave him, not just because our world didn't allow it but because my heart simply forbade it. I didn't want to leave Samuel alone. I wanted to be his anchor.

"Your friends fought for you. And you lived. Honor them by allowing yourself to live fully. Do it for us and our baby."

I hoped my speech had gotten through to him. I wasn't sure what else to do at this point. He thought he was in control. He thought admitting he wasn't would make him weak.

I never saw Samuel drink a single drop in the following weeks, but my intuition told me he was hiding it from me.

I needed to know for sure.

So when Danilo and Sofia came to visit us for Christmas, I approached my brother.

“Can you teach me how to pick a lock?” I asked casually.

Danilo gave me a worried look. “Why?”

“Because it could come in handy one day. Children sometimes lock themselves in. I want to be able to open a locked door.”

Danilo’s suspicion remained. “Why didn’t you ask Samuel?”

I was treading dangerous ground. I trusted my brother, but he and Samuel weren’t friends. They were civil toward each other, and their relationship had improved since their hunting trip, but they definitely didn’t go out of their way to spend time with each other. If I revealed Samuel’s alcohol problem to Danilo, Samuel might see it as betrayal, and it probably was. Still, I wished I could talk to someone about it. It was a heavy truth to carry.

Eventually, Danilo showed me how to pick a lock with a professional pick, and he even gave it to me. I wondered if he had his suspicions.

Later, after dinner, which Samuel missed because of work, according to him, he cornered me. “Is Samuel keeping any secrets from you?”

I gave him an amused look. “All Made Men are, right?”

“There are secrets that need to be kept and secrets that don’t.”

“Perhaps.”

“Are you worried he’s cheating on you?”

My eyebrows shot up. That was his first thought? “No,” I said without a hint of a doubt. “Samuel has made his stance on that matter clear from the very beginning.”

Danilo made a doubtful face.

“That’s not what’s going on, Danilo. Please trust my judgment.” I really didn’t need Danilo to cause any problems. Samuel was already pissed because I had said he had an addiction.

“I do. I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I know,” I said and pecked his cheek.

I was glad when Sofia and Danilo finally left for their hotel, even if I’d enjoyed their presence. I was too eager to try out my new skills. Despite my guilt over breaking into Samuel’s office and thus breaching his privacy, I saw no other way. I trusted my gut on this, and it told me that Samuel was keeping his drinking from me. I needed to know this for a fact to make up my mind about what to do next.

After three tries, I managed to unlock Samuel's office door and walked inside. The smell of alcohol hit me immediately. I rounded the desk and found an empty bourbon bottle beside the desk chair. When I opened the drawers, I found several more bottles of whisky, bourbon, cognac, and wine, most of them almost empty. None of these bottles were cheap. Maybe Samuel thought there weren't any sophisticated drunks and tried to deceive himself into thinking he was in control. As if alcoholism only manifested in the form of cheap liquor. I swallowed hard. Maybe I should have waited inside the office and confronted Samuel, but I couldn't bear being in the room where Samuel had hidden his secret. I locked the door again and moved into the living room.

I felt disheartened and at a loss. What could I do?

Samuel was a man of great pride and honor. How could I get through to him? I knew I needed to do something. I couldn't let things progress as they were.

Eventually, Samuel would get himself killed either through the alcohol or because he couldn't function in a dangerous situation.

It was not just Samuel's life that was at stake. Our life as a family too.

When Samuel finally came home close to midnight, I had come up with what to say, a convincing speech, but one look at his face told me he'd had a bad day. And I knew what that meant.

My smile was tight when he came toward me and kissed me. I smelled spearmint on his breath. His habit of chewing bubble gum during the day had set off my alarm bells, and today, my fears were proven right. In the beginning, I had even tried to convince myself that it was an innocent new habit to distract him from his desire to drink, but I knew deep down that it wasn't to take the place of one addiction but to cover up one.

One look into his eyes told me he had drunk quite a bit. Far more than the days before. If he weren't such a trained drinker, he probably would have had a slur and trouble walking, but as it was only the less controlled way of his mimic and the look in his eyes revealed the truth.

"How was your day?"

"I visited the graveyard today. It was meant as a final goodbye. Now that we'll be parents soon, I thought it was time to let the past rest."

Ah, so he wanted to dull his pain with alcohol. My heart ached for his anguish, but at the same time, I felt angry, so very angry because he lied to

me, because he was forcing me closer to a decision I didn’t want to make.

I loved Samuel. I loved him so much, but I was at a crossroads, and only one road allowed me to stay with him. Could I really give him an ultimatum like that?

Could I not? Could I let our baby be born into a household with an alcoholic father? What if he lost control because of it one day? I didn’t believe it, but wouldn’t it be negligent of me not to think about it?

Samuel cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair, squinting toward his office door. “I need to work for a couple more hours. Maybe you should go to bed.”

I pressed my lips together. “I think you should come to bed with me.” My eyes pleaded with him to follow me. *Don’t force me to make a choice my heart won’t survive.*

Samuel shook his head. “I really need to work. Things will calm down again soon.”

Another lie. This wasn’t about work. He would drink while locked in his office.

I followed Samuel into the hallway and watched him head for his office door. When he stopped in front of it, his eyes settled on the lock. He smoothed a finger over it. Had I left scratches in the metal?

This was my chance to say something.

He dropped his finger and reached for his key. “This is for your safety,” he said.

I didn’t say anything. Nothing about locking that door was for my safety. Rage bubbled up in me. He met my gaze. His lies met mine. Neither of us said anything for a couple of heartbeats. “Sleep tight.”

I nodded and turned around, then wheeled toward the elevator without looking back.

Tears prickled in my eyes, but I fought them.

It took more than an hour for me to fall asleep, but my sleep was fitful, and eventually, I woke up. At first, I wasn’t sure why, but then I realized my nightgown was wet. I froze. My first thought was that I had wet myself. In the very beginning, after my accident, that had happened on occasion, but that was years ago. I turned on the lights, and panic filled me. I was bleeding. For several heartbeats, I couldn’t do anything but stare, filled with terror. I touched my belly as my pulse raced in my veins.

I grabbed my phone and called Samuel. The phone rang several times before he finally picked up. “What’s wrong, Emma?”

His voice was rough, not slurred but definitely more drawn out than usual. My heart sank.

“I’m bleeding.”

“What? I’m coming up.”

I moved toward the edge of the bed, trying not to panic. With an anterior placenta like mine, bleeding wasn’t entirely uncommon. My doctor had warned me that this could happen.

Samuel staggered into the bedroom, his hair disheveled, his trousers and shirt wrinkled as if he’d slept on the floor. Remembering how I’d found him once at the beginning of our marriage, I knew this wasn’t completely unlikely.

Samuel came toward me, his eyes taking in my bloody nightgown. “I’ll take you to the hospital.” When he bent over me to pick me up, a wave of alcohol hit me. I scrunched up my nose. “You’re drunk.”

“I’m fine. I just had a glass of brandy to wind down.”

“You’re drunk, Samuel. Call Danilo. He can take me to the hospital.”

Samuel’s eyes flashed with anger. “I’m your husband. I’ll take you. I’m in control.”

I pressed my lips together, fighting an onslaught of emotions as he carried me down the stairs.

“Samuel—”

“I’m fine! We don’t need Danilo.”

I shook my head again. “You aren’t fine!”

His gait was steady despite the heavy note of alcohol on his breath and the slightly feverish look in his eyes. Maybe he could drive. But a warning voice in my head reminded me of the past. Fear gripped me.

“Samuel—”

He put me down on the passenger seat and buckled me up. “We’ll be quicker if I drive than if we wait for an ambulance or for your brother to arrive. We need to get you to a doctor as soon as possible.”

He was right but still…

I touched my belly, focusing on my baby.

Samuel got in the car and started the engine. My stomach constricted. Hazy memories from a crash long ago that changed my life resurfaced. My

bodyguard had also smelled of alcohol. It hadn’t been the first time he’d been drunk on the job. I had noticed the stench before, but he’d never had trouble driving before.

A vivid image of the car swerving to the side, of a truck heading our way, and the lights blinding me shot through my head. After that, everything was black. It was the moment that changed my life forever.

I swallowed hard. My instincts screamed at me not to let Samuel drive. But if I called Danilo or Pietro, they would know something was wrong, and they’d figure out that Samuel had a problem with alcohol.

I couldn’t betray Samuel like that. Right?

Samuel drove too fast.

I clutched the seat, fear clogging my throat. “Samuel, slow down.”

“You need help,” he muttered.

He drove way too fast into a curve, and the car swerved toward oncoming traffic. The headlights of a car blinded me. I screamed, raw fear ripping the sound from the depths of my body. Not again.

The car jerked to the side, barely missing the other car. I was flung against the door, then we jolted to a stop.

Samuel breathed harshly.

“Emma? Emma, are you okay?”

I blinked, trying to breathe in and out as a myriad of images I hadn’t remembered up until that point flooded my mind. Being stuck in a wreck, my bodyguard trying to talk to me, the acute pain in my head. Blood everywhere.

Samuel touched my shoulder. “Emma?”

I unbuckled myself. We were on the side of the road, parked at a bus stop. Samuel shook me slightly until my eyes focused on him. “Emma, say something.”

He had a cut on his temple where he must have hit the side of the car. Blood was trickling down his face.

The other car’s driver got out of his car and gestured wildly at Samuel.

“I’m okay,” I pressed out.

Samuel nodded, then he grabbed his phone. “Dad, I need you to pick Emma up quickly.”

An ambulance arrived before Pietro did. Samuel sat silently beside me, ignoring the other driver who tried to argue with him.

“I’m riding in the ambulance,” I told Samuel.

“I should come with you.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted that. I knew once the shock had lessened, I’d be furious. Not just at Samuel but also at me for getting into a car with a drunk driver. I should have known better. He should have too. But he was in denial of his problem, and I wasn’t.

Samuel regarded me. “Or I could drive there. I can’t leave my car here.”

“You should ride with your dad,” I said as the paramedics helped me onto the stretcher. I explained that the blood on my nightgown wasn’t from the crash, but I wasn’t sure if they believed me.

“It’s too dangerous for you to ride alone,” Samuel said with a frown.

“Getting in a car with you was too dangerous.”

I swallowed hard, guilt burning a hot trail through my insides. The disappointed and hurt look in Emma’s eyes almost killed me. I pressed a quick kiss to her forehead before I told the ambulance driver to be extra careful and explained the consequences if he wasn’t.

Dad arrived when the ambulance pulled away.

I felt almost sober by now. I had definitely drunk a bit more than I should have tonight. It had been a shitty day.

Dad touched my shoulder. “What happened?”

The usual lie lay on the tip of my tongue, but I was fucking tired of lying. I'd put so much energy into deceiving Emma…and she knew. "I drove drunk today and lost control of the car."

Dad frowned. "You should have called. Come on. I'll drive you to the hospital."

I sank down in the passenger seat.

When I rubbed my face, it came away bloody.

I hadn't even noticed I was injured. That was why the paramedic wanted to take a look at me.

"Has this happened before?" Dad asked carefully.

"Me driving drunk?" I asked with a hint of dark humor.

"Yes."

"I don't remember the last time I didn't drink something," I confessed. It felt good to admit it, but at the same time, shame crawled under my skin like cockroaches.

Dad slanted me a look. "Samuel?"

"I think Emma is going to leave me. I lied to her. I almost killed her today."

"Why didn't you come to me sooner? I'm your father. You can tell me anything."

"Dad, I'm your heir. I'm a Made Man. A man should be able to hold his liquor, right?"

Dad grimaced as he pulled into the parking lot of the hospital. "That's just something I said. It doesn't mean you should get drunk every day."

"I'm not drinking to get drunk. I hardly ever get drunk anymore. I just drink to function." I laughed bitterly. How was that for staying in control? Samuel Mione, the ice king, losing control of his life and body. A shame. A fucking disgrace.

"We'll grab a coffee or two before we head to Emma. You smell of alcohol. We need to get you sober before you see her again."

"I am sober. Or as sober as I can be."

Dad grabbed my arm. "Dammit, Samuel. I lost Fina. I won't lose you."

I nodded mutely. Fina.

"Is this because of her? Did you start drinking because of her?"

"Because of the friends I killed. Because of my inability to protect those I care about. Because I lost her to a madman. The list is long, Dad. The

funny thing is Emma makes me happy. But I still drink."

"Why?"

"Because I can't stop," I admitted, then shook my head. "Because of the guilt, because I'm scared to mess up and get Emma or our baby killed. I almost did today."

"You need to stop."

I nodded. I knew that. What if it was too late? What if I'd already lost Emma?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I watched the young female doctor in trepidation as she did the ultrasound. Samuel leaned against the wall next to me. I had ignored his outstretched hand and hadn't said a single word since he'd entered the room five minutes ago. I couldn't bear his touch right now. I was too agitated. With the doctor present, he couldn't really say much either, which was a relief.

My anxiety spiked to unbearable levels as the seconds trickled by while the doctor checked on the baby when suddenly a heartbeat sounded. I smiled, hope banishing my acute fear.

"Is everything okay?" Samuel murmured as he straightened, the cold mask on his face slipping for the first time since he'd entered the room. His worry dulled my anger briefly, but I reminded myself of the close call we'd had today.

The doctor nodded before she gave me a small smile. "I can't detect anything out of the ordinary. Your bleeding could have been the result of a hematoma bursting. This area"—she motioned at a darker area on the screen—"looks like a burst hematoma to me."

“And the crash?” I whispered. I hadn’t hit the side of the car very hard, but I could feel a bruise blooming on my upper arm.

Samuel crossed his arms in front of his chest, the tension returning to his body.

“I don’t see any injuries. You don’t have a concussion either. We have to wait on the examination of your arm to see if it’s only bruised. But I think you were very lucky.”

Samuel met my gaze, the regret in his eyes melting through my anger. I bit my lip. There would be time to talk about all this later. My mind was still too chaotic. Samuel pushed the hospital wheelchair closer to the bed, and I lowered myself into it since we’d left mine at home. With my growing belly, it wasn’t as easy as it used to be, but I didn’t want Samuel’s help.

“Please proceed to your room for now. My colleague will come to see you very soon.” The doctor opened the door for us, and Samuel pushed me out into the corridor. Pietro was waiting for us. He gave me a tight smile before he leveled his gaze on Samuel, who still looked slightly disheveled. Nothing an outsider or someone who didn’t know him would notice, but it was obvious to his dad.

“How about you go freshen up and grab another coffee, and I’ll take Emma to her room.”

Samuel met my gaze. I kept my face straight. Maybe he hoped I’d ask him to stay, but I still needed a couple of minutes to let the relief sink in. Our baby was okay. The bleeding had been nothing serious, which made our almost catastrophic crash even more tragic. What if I’d lost the baby because of this? I didn’t even want to think about it.

Samuel brushed my shoulder. “I’ll be back soon.” He bent down and pressed a kiss to my forehead, surprising me with the intimate gesture in front of his dad. It showed how shaken up he was and that I didn’t shy back exposed how shaken I was too.

“Okay,” I clipped and watched him stride away. Strong and tall but a little broken. My heart wanted to forgive him, but I knew he and I would have to have a serious conversation and find a solution before that could happen.

Pietro took me to my room. My arm hurt, so hoisting myself up caused me more trouble than anticipated.

“May I?” Pietro asked, opening his arms.

I nodded with a small, embarrassed smile. Accepting help often still made me uncomfortable, especially with people I wasn't very close to. Pietro was always very kind, but I wasn't as close to him as I was to Ines. He was a reserved man like Samuel, so bonding took longer.

"I'm heavier than I look," I joked.

Pietro chuckled. "And I'm not as old as I look."

My eyes widened. "You don't look old." He was in his late fifties, with gray streaks in his brown hair to show for it, but he was in shape and as tall as Samuel.

He picked me up and lifted me into the bed. "There you go." He met my gaze, and the mirth disappeared from his face, sadness and worry taking over. "Samuel feels horrible as he should. I don't know what's going on with him."

"Guilt and loss," I said quietly. "Denial."

Pietro nodded. "He's strong. He can handle it."

I shook my head. I didn't like contradicting Pietro. He was my father-in-law and the Underboss of the city, at least until January when Samuel would take over, but he was blind to the truth, like so many Made Men.

"He won't be able to handle it on his own. Especially if he becomes Underboss in January. That's even more weight that will be resting on his shoulders."

"It was announced officially that he'll take over in January. We can't change it now without raising suspicions."

I had feared he'd say that, and I knew Samuel would see it the same way.

"I know."

"We'll figure something out," Pietro assured me. "Samuel needs you, and I think you need him."

I nodded, then touched my bump. "And the baby needs me to protect it."

"Samuel won't ever do anything to risk your life or that of the baby again, I know it."

Pietro's phone beeped with a message, and he scanned it quickly, then looked back up.

"Your brother is on the way," Pietro murmured. "Samuel told him about the crash."

That wouldn’t go over well. Danilo would lose his shit on Samuel, and this time I couldn’t even blame him. “Does he know about the alcohol?”

Pietro’s lips tightened. “I don’t know, but I’m not sure if it’s wise to tell your brother this detail.”

I wasn’t either.

Fifteen minutes later, Danilo stormed into my hospital room. One look at his face told me things would be out of control soon. His eyes burned with fury. After he hugged me carefully, he straightened again. “Where is he?”

“Danilo, please calm down. We’re in public, and I’m fine,” I said, trying to avoid a huge scene. I wasn’t fine, not in the mental sense at least. The bruise on my arm would fade soon, but the almost crash would surely haunt my nights for a while.

The door opened at that moment, and Samuel stepped in. Danilo lunged at him and smashed his fist against Samuel’s face. Samuel shoved Danilo away but didn’t otherwise retaliate. His expression burned with guilt. I assumed that held him back. Pietro stepped between them. “Enough. Emma doesn’t need to see this.”

Danilo glowered at Samuel over Pietro’s shoulder. “I think she does. I think she needs to dump your sorry ass. You aren’t worthy of her.”

“This is between my wife and me,” Samuel said in a deadly whisper. A bruise was already forming on his chin.

Danilo walked toward my bed and pressed a kiss to my forehead before he turned to Samuel once again. “Emma almost died because of a drunk driver. She is in a wheelchair because of a drunk driver. And you fucking bastard get behind the wheel stinking drunk with her in the car? You could have killed her and the baby.”

Tears burned in my eyes, the heavy reality of the truth sinking in.

“I want a word with Emma,” Samuel said, his eyes locking on mine. His words had been a command, but his gaze asked me if it was okay.

I nodded. Danilo didn’t budge. “Don’t forgive him, Emma. Not for this.”

I swallowed hard, more tears gathering in my eyes. I’d always thought I’d never be with someone with an alcohol problem, but here I was. I squeezed Danilo’s hand. “Give us some privacy.”

Pietro stepped outside, and after a hard look at Samuel, Danilo followed him and closed the door.

Samuel lowered his head, his shoulders sagging. He shook his head, his eyes squeezing shut. “Danilo is right. You shouldn’t forgive me for this. Fuck, I’m a lying asshole who almost killed you and our child. I don’t deserve you, and I probably never will.”

“Not with the way you acted these past few months, no.” I shifted until I perched on the edge of the bed. I glared at him. “I’m so angry and disappointed. You promised, and you lied. Did you even try to stop drinking?”

He ran a hand through his hair, then winced. “I thought I could control it.”

“But you can’t! The alcohol is in control. How can I ever leave you alone with our baby if I have to be worried you can’t take care of it because you’re drunk.”

Samuel moved closer, grabbed my hands resting on my lap, and sank down on his knees. He kissed my knuckles and pressed his forehead against them. “There are no words to express how sorry I am. I hate myself more than you can ever understand, Emma. I know I shouldn’t ask you for this, but forgive me.” He peered up, his eyes locking on mine with almost feverish despair. “I can’t live without you.”

“I’m fine and so is our baby, but it could have ended very differently.”

“I know,” Samuel murmured, looking up with a haunted look in his eyes. He kissed my knuckles again. It was almost physically painful not to return his touch, not to fall into his arms, but I needed to be strong for past Emma and for our unborn baby. “I haven’t stopped thinking of what could have happened. Maybe it’s my fate to kill the people closest to me. I killed my friends, and I almost killed you.”

I glared. “Don’t blame this on fate, Samuel. This time, it was on you. Fate isn’t the problem. Your addiction is. You have to stop drinking.”

“I know,” Samuel said. “I love you more than anything.”

I swallowed, fighting the surge of emotions his declaration caused in me. Love declarations weren’t enough, not anymore. “More than alcohol?”

“Of course, more than anything.”

“Then let today be the last day you ever touch alcohol. You need to stop. No exceptions, not even at social functions or meetings with other

Underbosses. No exemptions at all. You're an alcoholic, and you can't control it. I don't want a single drop of alcohol in our house. I love you, Samuel. I love you so much, but that won't stop me this time." Tears blurred my vision. "I won't watch alcohol destroy the man that I love. I won't stand by and allow it to hurt our baby. And I won't be lied to or allow you to endanger me because you think you can control your addiction. I have fought too hard for this life to allow anyone to destroy it. Not even the man I love."

"Emma, I swear on everything I hold dear that I won't drink ever again. You're right." He swallowed hard. "I'm not in control of this." He let out a bitter laugh. "I thought I was too strong to become an alcoholic. But I'm not. I don't fucking care if everyone finds out about my weakness as long as that means I can keep you."

"You're not weak for admitting you have a problem. You're taking back control of your life. Fighting your addiction will be the hardest fight of your life, but it'll make you the strongest version of yourself that you've ever been."

Samuel pushed up to his feet and touched my cheeks. I could tell he wanted to kiss me, and part of me wanted him to, but I knew I needed to keep a certain distance until Samuel made good on his words.

"You can't win this fight alone."

"I have you, right? You have fought so many battles and won. You are all I need."

I touched his cheek. "I'll be by your side every step of the way, but it's not enough."

"You're right. I'll ask my father for help."

I gave him a small smile. "You can do it. I believe in you."

"For you, I will succeed."

Emma was supposed to spend the remainder of the night in the hospital to make sure she was okay. Danilo stayed with her. I didn’t like it, but Emma had made it clear that she needed some time to herself. I had fucked up.

If Emma or the baby had gotten seriously hurt, I would have never forgiven myself. Losing my friends would have been nothing in comparison. My pride had almost hurt the person I loved the most.

Dad kept glancing at me on our way home. Emma had asked me to spend the night with my parents so they could make sure I didn’t drink. Right this moment, I was still too furious at myself to drink, but I wasn’t sure how long that would last. I couldn’t deny my problem anymore. I had lied to myself and to Emma for far too long.

Exhaustion caught up with me. It was three in the morning, and I hadn’t slept more than fifteen minutes, but I knew I wouldn’t find peaceful sleep tonight.

“In only two weeks, you’ll take over from me.”

“That won’t change. My ability to do what’s required for the Outfit hasn’t suffered, and it won’t. I won’t admit to my problem in public. I only want the closest family to know. I need to appear strong.”

Dad nodded. “We’ll handle the situation as a family even though I wish we didn’t have to tell your mother. She’ll be worried sick.”

Guilt filled me. Mom had had enough reason to worry over the years. I hated to cause her additional turmoil.

I really didn’t want to see Mom’s reaction to the news—the shock, disappointment, worry, and sadness—but I knew I had to face this problem head-on. I’d ignored it for too long. I wasn’t a fucking coward.

“We have to tell her. I don’t want any more secrets. This problem won’t go away by itself.”

Dad sighed. “You’re right. Your mother is strong, and she’ll turn on her mother-bear mode once she hears about your struggles.”

My struggles. Even now, thinking about alcohol as that made me feel like a pussy. I should have been stronger than the addiction, but I wasn’t.

Mom was still awake when we came home. She wrapped me in a hug, checking the cut on my forehead that I still hadn’t let anyone treat. “How’s Emma?”

“She’s okay, but it could have been far worse.”

“What happened?” Mom asked.

“I lost control of the car,” I said. “I drank too much.”

Mom’s eyes widened. “Samuel! How could you? You know what happened to Emma. And what about the baby?”

“I know, Mom, trust me. I know I messed up, and it won’t happen again.”

Mom shook her head, her concerned eyes locked on mine. I could see the questions in them, questions she didn’t dare ask.

“I’ll have to grab something from the car,” Dad said. I had a feeling he needed a smoke. Maybe I should have picked cigarettes instead of booze to deal with my problems, but it had never been a conscious choice on my part. Addiction had crept up on me like a stealthy enemy I had never seen coming.

Once Dad was outside, I let out a sigh, wondering how to say what I needed to say. “It’s not the first time I was really drunk. I drink a lot. More than I should. More than I can handle. I’m not in control and haven’t been in a while.”

Mom listened with a pained look on her face, but she didn’t seem surprised by my words.

The words I needed to say stuck like glue in my throat, but I spat them out. “I’m an alcoholic.” Fuck, that admission was a punch in the gut. An addict. Being an addict felt like something that happened in dark alleys to

people who had no future and no choices. Not to someone like me. Maybe that misconception made alcohol such a dangerous adversary.

Mom pulled me into a hug. I patted her back lightly. “It’s going to be okay, Mom. I’ll deal with it now. I won’t risk losing Emma over this.”

Mom pulled back, tears in her eyes. “I know you’ll beat this. We’ll help you.”

Dad came back in with a cautious look, and Mom narrowed her eyes at him when he pressed a kiss to her temple. “Maybe you too could try to give up on your addiction?”

Dad gave a terse nod. He smelled of smoke. He kissed Mom’s cheek. “Go to bed. It’s late. I’ll take care of Samuel’s wound.”

Mom reluctantly moved upstairs, and I followed Dad into his office, where he kept a first-aid kit. My eyes landed on the array of liquor bottles in the cabinet. Usually, I would have had a drink before getting stitched up. A voice in my head told me that one last sip wouldn’t hurt anyone, but I ignored it.

Dad narrowed his eyes at me. “Will this be a problem?”

I shook my head. “No. Not yet at least.”

Dad nodded slowly as he took out the strips to fix my cut. “Would an enemy be able to tempt you with alcohol under torture?”

“No,” I said firmly. I wasn’t sure of many things right now, but I wouldn’t break under torture because they waved a bottle of wine in front of me.

Dad nodded. “I’m still Underboss for the next two weeks, and I’ll keep a close eye on you to make sure you prove to Emma that you’re serious about becoming sober.”

Becoming sober. I hated how that sounded. But it was the reality of the situation. *Fuck*.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I'd just sent Danilo back to his hotel room to shower and talk to Sofia when Giorgia came in with a box of chocolates. Renato gave me a tight smile and a nod, then closed the door so we'd have privacy. She came over to the bed and hugged me carefully, her eyes crinkling with worry as she looked at me. "How are you?"

I shrugged. "Okay, I think. A little shaken from the accident."

Giorgia shook her head. "This is the second time you scared me to death. Can you stop?"

I let out a small laugh. "I'll try."

She pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat. "I got chocolate truffles for you. Don't worry, they are without alcohol."

I smiled and took one of the small treats.

"Do you want to talk about what happened?"

I swallowed the chocolate, then released a small sigh. "You can't tell anyone, not even Renato, but maybe Samuel will tell him. He's his best friend after all."

"I'll keep your secret."

I confided in Giorgia and immediately felt a weight being lifted off my shoulders. For the road ahead, both Samuel and I needed support, and Giorgia had always been my best friend.

Pietro picked me up at the hospital with my wheelchair.

“Samuel hasn’t drunk anything since the car accident,” Pietro said as we headed to their mansion.

“That’s a good start.” That was only twelve hours, but I hoped it was really the beginning of him winning this battle.

When Pietro and I entered the mansion, both Ines and Samuel waited for us in the entry. Samuel came toward me, looking his usual sophisticated self, but for once in slacks and a sweater. “How are you?” he murmured.

“Better,” I said.

“And the little one?” He brushed his fingers over my bump.

“Kicking me all morning.”

Samuel smiled, then straightened. Ines took his place and pulled me in a tight hug.

“Would you like a tea?”

I nodded. “I need to have a word with Samuel first.”

Samuel led me toward his father’s office. I immediately noticed that all the liquor bottles were gone from the cabinet. “Dad hid them this morning when I slept on the sofa.”

“That makes sense.”

“You think I have so little restraint?” he asked quietly, stopping in front of me.

“What do you think?”

He sighed and squatted before me. “I know it’ll be hard, really hard, but I know why I’m doing it, and I won’t fail.”

I touched his hand, and he linked our fingers. “I think we should move in with your parents for a few days until the absolute worst of your

withdrawal is over. It’s Christmas, so nobody will be surprised if we decide to be close as a family.”

Samuel nodded. “Perfect timing. Trying to get sober during Christmastime.”

“It would be the best Christmas present I could imagine if you didn’t drink until Christmas morning.”

“That’s only four more days.”

“The first few days will be the hardest, and the rest will be hard too. Addiction is a lifelong battle, Samuel.”

I had tried to read any article I could get my hands on in the past few months. I was far from being an expert, but I wanted to support Samuel as well as I could.

“I know. But I’ve never shied away from a battle, and I won’t start now. So will you stay here with me?”

“Of course, I won’t leave you alone.”

“So you still want to be married to me?”

I sighed. “I love you, that hasn’t changed, and I want to spend the rest of our lives together.”

Samuel kissed me lightly. “I’ll make it up to you, everything, the lies, the crash, I swear.”

Ines sat down beside me at the dining table, and she poured herself coffee while I stuck to herbal tea. I’d never been a huge coffee drinker, and since my pregnancy, I abhorred the taste. Not to mention the restlessness I felt due to the caffeine.

Ines had ordered cupcakes from her favorite bakery. “Which one would you like?”

“Passionfruit.” I pointed at the cupcake with white frosting and the orange-black seeds of the fruit on top. I smiled. “I’m still really into everything sour. My lemon water consumption is ridiculous.”

Ines laughed as she took a vanilla cupcake for herself. “Oh, I remember the cravings. Especially with Samuel and Serafina, they were strong, as was my morning sickness.” Wistfulness filled her eyes as she thought about the past.

The thought of being separated from my child brought tears to my eyes. Pregnancy hormones were no joke.

Ines took my hand and squeezed. “I made my peace with it. Deep down, I know Serafina is happy where she is, and that’s enough for me.” She took a small bite from her cupcake with a distant expression. “It was hard for Samuel. Especially because he lost not just his twin but also three of his best friends. He can’t stop blaming himself.”

“I know.”

“He told me about his alcohol problem when he came here from the hospital. I’ve had my suspicions. But I didn’t think it was this serious.”

Relief flooded me that Samuel had found the courage to talk about this with his mother. Admitting to his problem was hopefully the first step toward recovery. I wanted nothing more.

“It is,” I whispered.

“You’re not going to leave, are you?”

I took her hand. “I’ll be honest with you. I considered it. I don’t want our child to find him passed out on the floor stinking of bourbon.”

“Did that really happen?”

I nodded, hating to tell her about this. “Is it okay if Samuel and I spend a few days with you? We think it’s for the best if Samuel has additional family support during this time. Pietro can keep him in check better than I do, and they are together at work too so he can make sure Samuel doesn’t consume alcohol then.”

“I’ll throw away all of our alcohol. I don’t want Samuel to be tempted. And I’ll ask our cook to prepare our Christmas meals without alcohol.”

“Can you help me remove the alcohol from our place too? I don’t know if Samuel has any hiding places except for his car, the garage, and his office.”

Ines’s face pinched. “He shouldn’t have hidden this from you.”

“That’s part of being an addict. But he swore he would never keep a secret like this from me again.”

Later that day, we gathered all the flasks and bottles in a basket so Pietro could take them away. Samuel also revealed two hiding places in our house, in one of his clothes drawers and the weaponry in the basement, and Pietro threw away everything while Samuel and I packed a suitcase for the next few days. I really hoped that there weren't any more hiding places that Samuel hadn't told us about, but he had sworn to me that he was serious, and I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I knew addiction was a strong opponent, but Samuel was stronger.

Just one more taste before I end it for good. It's a shame to let the expensive whisky that Renato gifted me go to waste. A final goodbye.

The words had thrummed in my head incessantly during the drive to our house, and it took considerable effort for me to reveal where I hid said bottle. Now that Dad had thrown away everything, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

Emma and I had agreed that it would be best for us to move in with my parents for a couple of days. Emma was worried about the physical and mental withdrawal effects. I wasn't too worried. I had been trained to withstand torture. I had already lived through hell. What kind of withdrawal symptoms could possibly be worse than what I had experienced over the years? But I wanted to show Emma how serious I was.

Moving back in with my parents felt strange, even if it was just for a week tops and during Christmastime. Especially since Emma was with me. I'd be under constant surveillance. When Emma and I settled in our bedroom on the day after the crash, she gave me a look full of confidence and trust. That wasn't something I wanted to break.

I hadn't drunk since last night shortly before the crash. Less than twenty-four hours without alcohol. I didn't feel too bad yet, except for a slight headache and a sense of restlessness that made me want to go jogging at full speed.

During dinner, Mom and Dad kept throwing glances my way as if they were waiting for any obvious signs of withdrawal. My shirt stuck to my clammy back, but that wasn't something I wanted to share with them. Danilo and Sofia weren't having dinner with us. They'd decided to go to one of Sofia's favorite places in the city. It was probably because Dad worried that Danilo and I would get into a fight. Danilo had sent me several threatening messages, but I hadn't replied. I understood his anger. I had fucked up last night, and something like that would never happen again.

"We'll decide tomorrow if you're fit to accompany me to the newest casino in St. Paul."

"I'll be fine, Dad. My symptoms are hardly worth mentioning, and I doubt that will change. I didn't get drunk every day."

"But you consumed every day," Emma said softly. "More than a glass of wine."

I gritted my teeth. I shouldn't feel frustrated because Emma said the truth. While I realized I had a problem, I didn't think it was as monumental as Emma made it out to be. I wouldn't lose it because I suddenly had to live without alcohol. Deep down, I couldn't help but hope that I'd eventually be able to drink a glass here and there, and stay in control over it.

After dinner, Emma and I retired to our bedroom. By now, not just my back was sweaty but my hands felt clammy too. I was way too hot.

Emma gave me a scrutinizing glance. "You look flushed."

"It's too hot for me."

She didn't comment, but I could tell that she blamed it on withdrawal. I preferred to think my parents had simply turned the AC too high.

I took a long, cold shower but when I stepped out, I didn't feel cooler, and worse, I felt slightly lightheaded. I stretched out in bed and stared up at

the ceiling. I felt a little uneasy.

“Are you alright?” Emma asked softly.

“I’m fine.”

She nodded but didn’t look convinced. “I’ll just get ready, then I’ll be back.”

“I don’t need constant supervision. There’s no alcohol in the house that I could access.” The idea that Dad had locked his collection of expensive whiskies and bourbons in a safe because of me made me feel horrible.

I closed my eyes, but after a while, my pulse began racing, and my throat felt tight, so I opened my eyes again and continued staring at the ceiling. I really wanted a drink with Dad. It was our tradition to end the evening with a tumbler filled with exquisite spirits.

The sound of Emma’s wheelchair made me turn my head. “My father and I had the tradition of ending our evening with a good glass of whisky. It’s how we always bonded even after an argument.”

“You’ll find new traditions and new ways to bond.”

“It doesn’t work with a glass of water or a green smoothie,” I muttered, feeling really angry all of a sudden. Emma stretched out beside me and put her hand on my chest.

“I know it feels like you’re giving up too much right now, but you’re gaining more. You’re gaining control and health.”

“And I get to keep you and our baby. That’s my price for giving up alcohol.”

Emma leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to my cheek. “I’ll be by your side every step of the way. Even when it gets hard.”

I nodded and stroked her cheek. My headache had worsened and was impacting my vision.

“Let’s sleep,” Emma suggested. She turned off the lights. Despite my pulse picking up once again, I didn’t ask her to turn it back on. Whatever was happening with my body, I could handle it.

My hands were bloody. The knife I was clutching was bloody. My clothes were bloody.

So much blood.

A scream sounded, followed by pleading.

I looked up from my hands. Renato was chained to a chair. His body was covered in cuts and burns, and skin was missing in parts. “Stop. Please stop. I don’t know anything. Have mercy.”

He pleaded with me. I was the one torturing him.

I wanted to stop, but my hand with the knife moved toward his chest. I couldn’t stop it. The moment the tip of my knife bored into his skin and slid beneath the upper layer, he let out a hoarse scream, his features twisting in agony. Suddenly, his face morphed into that of Enea.

“Stop,” he cried.

“Stop,” I repeated, almost as desperate as he was. But I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. I watched myself torture my friend like a bystander, unable to help him, unable to protect him from myself.

“Samuel!”

My cheek stung.

“Samuel.” My eyes opened to brightness, the contorted face of Enea dissipating and Emma’s pale face taking form in front of me. She looked horrified.

I sat up and raised my hands before my face, turning them over and over. They were covered in blood. I looked around for the knife. But there was none. I shoved to my feet and searched the floor, then checked my bloody hands again.

“Samuel, what are you doing?”

“Where is the knife?”

Emma gave me a pained look. “There is no knife here. Your gun is in the drawer of your nightstand, and you left your knives downstairs.”

I opened the drawer where I found my gun, but no knife.

I moved into the bathroom, desperate to wash my hands, but when I looked at them this time, they were clean. No sign of blood. I was covered in sweat, and my hair was drenched. Slowly, I walked back into the bedroom. Emma perched on the edge of the bed, watching me with concern.

I sank down on my side. I needed a moment to gather myself. The linens and covers were damp from my sweat.

“It was me who tortured Enea,” I croaked.

“You pleaded and screamed.”

A knock sounded. I jerked to my feet and drew my gun. “Come in.”

My father poked his head in. I lowered my gun. Mom stepped out from behind Dad’s back.

“Everything okay?” Dad asked.

“I had a nightmare,” I said, realizing nothing had actually happened. It had felt more real than any dream before.

Mom came in and quietly talked to Emma, who nodded. Mom gave me a shaky smile before she moved back out. “Will you be okay?” Dad asked Emma.

“Yes,” she said firmly.

Dad met my gaze, concern shining in his brown eyes. I gave him a firm nod, and he nodded in turn, then took Mom’s hand and led her out. After they’d left, I took another shower.

“Do you want me to change the linens?” I asked Emma.

She shook her head. “We can do it in the morning. It’s almost four anyway. My side is dry. You could put towels over yours. Or we take the spare blanket from the wardrobe.”

I leaned over her and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I won’t sleep again. I’ll go watch something downstairs.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“You need your sleep.” I gently caressed her belly before I walked out.

I sucked in a deep breath and made my way downstairs, where I grabbed a Coke from the fridge and downed it in one draw, then walked back out of the kitchen. My gaze lingered on the door to Dad’s office. I knew the safe was impossible to break open, yet a desperate part of me wanted to try.

Just one sip.

One fucking sip.

I could simply head out for a drink. There was a bar not too far from here. Maybe they were still open. Or I could go to Renato. He always had enough liquor at home.

I closed my eyes. I promised Emma. I wouldn’t risk losing her because of this weak voice in my head. I was stronger than an addiction.

I stopped and took a deep breath. My hands became clammy, and my heartbeat picked up for no fucking reason. *Dammit.* I'd had a slower pulse when being shot at, and here, my body was acting up because of a drink.

I'd go to the living room and wait for morning. In a day or two, I'd be through the worst. At least, that was what I hoped.

"Can't sleep?" Dad asked as he appeared at the end of the hallway.

"I could, but I won't," I said simply and strode toward him. The hallway ended in the entry, where Dad waited for me.

He was still in his pajamas like me. "Want some company?"

I nodded. I wanted to do this alone, but I knew I needed all the help I could get. Dad and I moved into the living room together and sat on the couch across from the TV. Dad picked up the remote. "What do you want to watch?"

"Something that distracts me." Dad zapped through several streaming platforms before he settled on a cooking show. I slanted him a confused look. "A cooking show?"

He shrugged and settled against the backrest. "Watching other people cook delicious meals calms me."

"Do you have a secret identity as a chef?"

Dad chuckled. "I can't cook to save my life. But I like eating."

I patted the small belly he'd developed again over the past year. He was still in much better shape than the majority of men his age, but he'd definitely enjoyed food a bit too much recently. Maybe because he'd given up cigarettes for many months—until yesterday. "I can tell."

Dad scowled at me. "Careful," he said, playing offended. "Your mother likes it. The dad bod is all the rage now."

I scoffed. "Sure. Mom's just happy you finally gave up cigarettes." I really hoped yesterday hadn't set him back again.

"Your mother is still very pleased with me in every regard."

The way he said it made it clear he was referring to their sex life, something Dad usually never did.

Maybe late-night talks in dire situations had that effect. I grimaced. "Thanks, Dad. Now I definitely have other images than a glass of bourbon in my head."

Dad kept his eyes on the screen where someone cracked eggs into water that he was spinning around with a spoon. No clue what he was trying to

accomplish there. Maybe a fancy way to make scrambled eggs. “You’ll get through this. Temptation will cross your path constantly in the future, but know that resisting will get easier over time.”

Dad had tried to stop smoking several times over the years. He’d once stopped when he’d married Mom but had picked the habit up again after Serafina got kidnapped. “What do you do when you feel tempted?”

Dad glanced my way with a look of regret. “Sometimes I give in, like yesterday, but I really wish I hadn’t. That one cigarette really didn’t accomplish anything but worry your mother and make it harder for me. There’s always the temptation, but mostly I’m good at resisting. When there’s a long meeting and others start smoking. Or after a particularly delicious meal.”

“Do you think you’ll be back to smoking constantly because you took a pull yesterday?”

Dad smiled sadly. “I’m not sure. I can tell that my body is already craving another cigarette. I made things harder for myself. When I had a smoke after finding out Serafina was kidnapped, I was back to smoking a package a day and the second time I started smoking again as well. Maybe some people manage to smoke only on special occasions and aren’t tempted otherwise, but I’m not one of them, and I don’t want to risk it. Your mother would be really upset if I started smoking again, so I’m determined to let yesterday’s cigarette be the last one. She thinks my life’s dangerous enough. I don’t need to do other things that put me in an early grave.”

“I want to believe that I could handle drinking sporadically at some point, but I know it won’t be that way. And I don’t want to disappoint Emma.”

“You shouldn’t. She’s a good woman and soon the mother of your child.”

“What do I tell people? I always drink at functions, meetings, always. They’ll start to wonder why suddenly I don’t.”

Dad’s expression hardened. “You’ll be Underboss soon. You don’t need to justify your actions to anyone but me. And your wife. So don’t say anything. It’s not their fucking business. End of story. Maybe they’ll blame it on you becoming a father.”

I smiled. “The advantage of power.” I paused. “What about Dante?”

“Dante will certainly notice the difference, so when he asks, we’ll tell him.”

I blew out a breath. “I messed up once. Big time. He didn’t kill me, though he should have. And now I’ll disappoint him again.”

“He won’t be disappointed in you for giving up on alcohol, for making the responsible choice and taking back control. He might punish you if you keep drinking on the job and mess up, though.”

Dad had a point. I had been drunk in several dangerous situations in the past. It could have cost me and others their lives. Fuck. It had taken me way too long to ditch alcohol. I shivered, suddenly cold. Dad glanced my way. “You’ve got chills.”

Perspiration appeared on my forehead.

“I’ll be glad when this part is over,” I admitted.

“The physical withdrawal symptoms won’t be the hardest part. Your mind telling you to drink will be much harder to bear.”

I leaned my head back against the backrest. I wasn’t even sure when I’d crossed the line from occasional drinker to habitual drinker to alcoholic. What I knew with absolute certainty was that today marked the day I’d stop. For Emma.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

After Samuel left the bed, I barely slept. Having seen how hard his nightmare had affected him and how the effects of it had lasted even after he'd woken up had shaken me too. The withdrawal would be emotionally draining, not just physically.

When I woke up after having fallen asleep eventually, Samuel's side of the bed was still empty. I quickly got ready, then headed downstairs to find him. A small part of me was worried that he'd found a way to drink. When I found him on the sofa, asleep with his chin on his chest and covered with a cozy blanket, guilt overwhelmed me. I needed to trust Samuel. But I knew addiction was a tough opponent.

"He fell asleep thirty minutes ago," Ines said, startling me in my wheelchair. She appeared beside me with a cup of coffee cradled in her palms. "He was exhausted. Pietro was with him all night."

"That was so sweet of him. I should have been there for him as his wife."

Ines touched my shoulder with a gentle smile. "I think it was important for Samuel and Pietro to talk and bond over this experience. And you need

lots of sleep. You’re growing a human.”

The concept was still hard to grasp for me.

“Come on, let’s have breakfast. Samuel needs some more rest.”

Ines and I ate alone in the dining room. Pietro had to leave for work early despite his lack of sleep. I had a feeling Samuel would be annoyed that his father had left without him. But considering his pallor, it was for the best if he spent the day on the sofa.

I wasn’t sure if the worst withdrawal symptoms were already over. It was Christmas Eve in three days, and I hoped we’d overcome the worst by then.

Two hours later, my worries were confirmed. Samuel woke shivering and sweaty from another nightmare, and again, it took him several moments to realize he had been dreaming.

His eyes met mine, and he gave me a tight smile. I wheeled over to him and touched his thigh. “Maybe a bath will help.”

He nodded. “I definitely need to shower. Maybe a bath would be even better.” He pushed to his feet, then swayed slightly before he caught himself. His lips thinned, and a look of annoyance filled his eyes. Samuel, like many Made Men, hated any sign of weakness. “After a few more days, you’ll feel more like yourself again.”

He frowned. “Will I? I don’t even remember what it was like before I started drinking every day.”

“We’ll figure it out together.” Samuel leaned down and kissed the top of my head before he straightened once more.

He shivered. He looked as if he was going to be sick at any moment. He closed his eyes, squared his shoulders, then headed out. I followed him but stopped in the entry.

Watching Samuel like this filled me with pride and sadness. I hated seeing him suffering even though I knew it was necessary.

Ines came toward me and squeezed my shoulder as we watched Samuel drag himself upstairs for a shower. “He’s doing it for you and your child, not for himself.”

“I know. I hope he realizes that he’s worth it too.”

“One day. If anyone can make him see his self-worth, it’s you.”

I’d do my best. I had all the patience in the world. My accident had taught me perseverance.

Despite his frustration with himself and his body, Samuel finally listened and rested on the sofa most of the day. After an early dinner, we went upstairs shortly after eight. I too felt tired from the previous night, so I didn’t mind an early bedtime. Tomorrow, Danilo and Sofia would join us, and I hoped it wouldn’t be too much for Samuel. Danilo had sent me several messages since the accident, and he’d definitely want to talk to me privately tomorrow.

Samuel watched me from the bench in front of the bed as I changed into my nightgown awkwardly. With my growing belly, getting dressed was more difficult, especially as my body took up more room in my wheelchair so I had less space to move. I gave him a smile before I moved into the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face. I hadn’t bothered putting on makeup today. When I started brushing my hair, Samuel joined me in the bathroom. He watched me intensely as he brushed his teeth.

Eventually, I put down the brush. Samuel’s intense observation made me feel incredibly hot. He rinsed his mouth, then turned to me. “You’re gorgeous and sexy, you know that?”

I flushed at his praise. “Thanks to you, I often do.”

He came toward me and braced himself on my wheelchair. “Then I’m doing it wrong. You should always feel that way.”

I smiled. “Nobody always feels sexy and gorgeous.” Samuel leaned down and kissed me. One of his hands cupped my face and throat, tilting my head back so he could deepen the kiss. My body sprang to life at the passionate kiss, at the incredible heat he emitted, and the way his tongue played with mine. “I want you. Let me make love to you.”

I hesitated. Samuel had had a hard day. His body had been put through the wringer, and I was worried that it would frustrate him if he didn’t perform like he was used to. Samuel was proud, and he’d definitely see it as a hit to his manliness. But I longed for him. Maybe he needed this to prove

to himself that we were still okay and we'd get through this. I wanted to show him that everything would be okay. Perhaps he needed more than words to truly believe it.

Samuel pulled back with a bitter smile. "I guess my performance today wasn't a huge turn-on."

I frowned. "That's nonsense. You always turn me on, Samuel. You're sexy." I ran my hands down his chest, then slid my fingers under his shirt and brushed his arms and chest. "I'm just worried that you're demanding too much from your body."

"I know my body might ruin things for me, but I don't care. I need to make love to you. I need to feel something good. I need you, Emma."

"Oh Samuel," I whispered.

"And I'll make sure you come, even if my cock fucks up."

"I don't care about coming. I want to be with you, that's all."

His lips crashed against mine once again. Our kiss banished the last doubt from my mind. I tugged at his shirt, desperate to get him naked. I never got enough of seeing Samuel naked. He was Adonis in human form, and he was all mine. Every glorious inch of him. Samuel dragged his shirt over his head, and my fingers mapped his skin as my eyes admired it. I tugged at the waistband of his pajama bottoms until they slid down his hips and pooled at his feet, revealing his half-erect cock. I took him in my hands and leaned forward, eager to pleasure him. Samuel let out a groan when his tip slid into my mouth. He regarded me through half-lidded eyes, but from the tight set of his shoulders, I could tell he was tense.

As I circled him with my tongue and cupped his balls, he grew harder immediately.

Samuel stroked my hair out of my face to get a better look. "This is about you, Emma, not me."

"This is about us," I corrected and sucked him slowly into my mouth until his tip hit the back of my throat. With my eyes on him, I let his cock glide out again, then sucked it back in. Samuel held my head as I pleasured him with my tongue and lips.

Samuel stepped back and grabbed my hips, then hoisted me up on the counter. He pushed up my nightgown and pulled my panties down my legs. It was damp with arousal. Samuel's gaze was full of need and desire as he

looked into my eyes. “Now it’s your turn. I’ll worship your gorgeous body until you beg me to stop.”

I bit my lip. “I doubt I can ever have enough of your touch. It’s my addiction.”

“The right kind of addiction,” Samuel growled.

I kissed Emma hard, grabbing her face with both hands. She tilted her head up eagerly.

I tugged down her strap and freed one perfect breast. I released her lips and moved lower so my lips could cup her nipple. She arched against me, and I sucked more of her breast into my mouth. My other hand massaged her hip, then stroked along her thigh. Emma was panting as I lavished her nipple with attention, and the scent of her arousal flooded my nose like an intoxicating perfume. I released Emma’s nipple and leaned back to get a better view as I slowly pushed her legs apart, revealing her glistening pussy. Emma exhaled with a look of anticipation on her face. I splayed my fingers across her inner thigh, spreading her even wider open for me. The sight of her opening, ready and eager for me, sent a new flood of blood into my cock. At least, that part of my body didn’t disappoint me today.

I ran my thumb over Emma’s opening and up over her silky lips, parting them as I did until I reached the slight swell of her clit. I focused my attention there, gently stroking up, spreading her wetness and coaxing her

little button out with my ministration. Emma leaned back on her palms, panting, her chest heaving. She bit her lip and swallowed.

I could tell she was trying to be quiet. “Are you worried my parents can hear us?” I rubbed her clit a little harder and faster. Her slickness made it easy for my finger to move.

She gave me a pleading look.

“Trust me, they’ll be happy to know you make me happy right now.”

I leaned closer, kissed her ear, then murmured, “How many do you want?”

She watched me through half-lidded eyes as my thumb brought her closer and closer to release.

“How many fingers do you want in your tight pussy, love?”

She shuddered, then breathed, “Three.”

“My insatiable kitten. Let’s hope you can take what you’re asking for.”

She bit her lip, her gaze pure sex. “Your cock is bigger than that, and I can handle him.”

I grinned. My thumb rubbed her clit harder as I stroked her opening with the fingers of my other hand. I slid in one finger. “One.” I pulled it out and pushed in two fingers. “Two.” Her lashes fluttered, her lips parted as she panted harder.

I pushed in three fingers, and Emma clenched around me, her eyes falling shut as she mounted the last bit to her climax.

“Good girl,” I praised her as she spasmed around my fingers that I curled as deeply in her pussy as I could while my thumb circled her engorged clit. Her fingers grabbed the edge of the marble counter as she whimpered and shuddered through her release. Arousal slicked my fingers. When she came down from her high, I pulled out my fingers.

“Now I need a taste.” Emma’s eyes slid open as I knelt and bent over her pussy. She grabbed my hair as if to stop me, but I leaned forward until my tongue reached her opening. I dipped in for the first intense taste, groaning deeply as I did so.

Emma leaned back against the mirror, her head dipped back and her eyes closed. Her fingers against my head became slack, but her pussy twitched against my mouth, overstimulated but at the same time eager for what I was doing. I traced every inch of her pussy with my tongue, lapping

up Emma’s sweetness. “This tastes better than any bourbon or whisky. I think I’ll simply have to eat you out whenever I feel the need for a drink.”

Emma let out a raw laugh, her eyes peeling open slowly. I smirked. Then I pushed up to my feet. Emma reached for my face and pulled me in for a kiss. I grabbed her ass cheeks and lifted her off the counter. After securing her legs around my waist, I carried her over to the bed.

I put her down and stretched out on top of her. My cock was pressed against her pussy, but I didn’t want to fuck her yet. I simply wanted to feel her, to kiss her. I cradled her head and kissed her deeply. Our eyes locked as we kissed, and my heart swelled at the look of tenderness in Emma’s gaze. I pulled back. “I love you. I know I don’t say it often, but I love you every second of the day. I’m glad you put up with my shit and are still by my side. I don’t want to imagine my life without you.”

“I love you too.”

She twitched, eyes darting down. I raised my eyebrows. “The baby kicked very hard.”

I rolled off her and stared at her exposed belly. Emma took my hand and put it down on the spot beneath her ribs. It took a couple of moments before I felt a gentle shift. Emma winced. She could obviously feel the movements more strongly than I did. Still I kept my palm there and felt another slight movement. I smiled. Most days, becoming a father seemed far away, but this made it more real. It also emphasized how important it was for me to get a grip on my fucking alcohol problem. I wouldn’t let it ruin everything. I had already done a good enough job of that with the crash.

Emma ran her fingers through my hair. “The past is the past. You have today and every day that follows to prove yourself.”

Fuck, and I would. I pressed my ear against Emma’s belly, wondering if I could hear anything. Except for the low rumble of Emma’s belly, there was nothing. I cocked an eyebrow at Emma. “Hungry?” I asked suggestively.

Emma gave me an embarrassed smile. “For food, yes. I’m sorry. I feel like I’m constantly starving, especially in the evening.”

I chuckled and got out of bed. “What are you in the mood for?” I asked as I put on pajama pants and a T-shirt.

Emma sat up with a mortified expression. “PB&J sandwich, warm milk, and pretzels.”

I shook my head with a deep laugh. “All right. I’ll raid the fridge and cabinets to see what we have.” I paused. “Do you want me to head out to a store if we’re out of anything?”

She quickly shook her head. “Just surprise me with a good substitute.”

“Your wish is my command.” I jogged down the stairs but had to slow down halfway because my head spun again. I was annoyed at my body for messing with me like that. I’d hoped I wouldn’t show any obvious withdrawal symptoms.

Upon hearing me, Dad emerged from the living room with a look of concern on his face. “Everything okay?”

“Emma is hungry. I need to search the kitchen for the things that strike her fancy.”

Dad chuckled and followed me into the kitchen. If it was to help me or to make sure I didn’t find any alcohol, I wasn’t sure. Usually, there was always a cooking wine on the counter and one in the fridge, but Mom had thrown them away.

I didn’t find peanut butter, only almond butter that Mom used for breakfast bowls, and a sugar-free chia jam. Neither would probably quench Emma’s cravings. The grain-free protein bread that Dad ate definitely wouldn’t get me any bonus points either, but I had to work with what I had.

“Do you want me to send one of the bodyguards out to the store?” Dad asked.

“I fear Emma will have starved by then.”

Dad nodded as if he could remember Mom being the same way.

I added maple syrup to the chia jam for sweetness, which resulted in a very soppy sandwich. I grabbed some cutlery in case Emma needed it. Then I heated some milk in the microwave. “Do you have pretzels?”

Dad shook his head. “I snacked on them too much.”

“Do you have any kind of savory treat?”

“I think your mom always keeps a stash of kale chips.”

I sent Dad an annoyed look. Emma wouldn’t be impressed at all with my selection. “Tell the maid to grab some unhealthy stuff in the morning, for God’s sake.”

Dad patted my back with a smile. “Good to see you being distracted like that.”

I grabbed the tray and headed back to the bedroom. Maybe it had been Emma's intention. Though her stomach had definitely requested food. That hadn't been a ploy to distract me.

When I entered the bedroom, Emma sat up immediately and held out her hands. I put the tray on her lap, and she scanned the food, then gave me a questioning look. I shrugged. "My parents are on a health kick. I did my best."

She lifted one of the bread slices, revealing the jam and maple syrup disaster. It didn't look appealing in the slightest.

Maybe I should just order some food. "I can—"

Emma grabbed the sandwich, dripping it all over the tray, and took a huge bite. She shrugged. "It doesn't taste bad." She finished the sandwich within a minute. Her chin and upper lip were smeared with jam. I shook my head and grabbed a towel from the bathroom. I'd forgotten napkins. By the time I returned, she was eating the kale chips.

I sank on the edge of the bed and regarded her as she downed half of the milk. Then she gave me a pleased smile. "This wasn't so bad. I don't suppose there's a piece of chocolate somewhere in this house?"

I chuckled and pushed to my feet. "You keep me busy and not the way I had planned."

Emma gave me a sheepish grin. "Sorry, it's the hormones. But we can still continue where we left off later if you want?" I looked at Emma's jam-covered lips and the crumbs of kale attached to it, then bent down and kissed her ear. "You never looked sexier."

She swatted me away with an indignant look. "So that's a no?"

"That's a definite yes."

I left in search of chocolate. Dad sat on the couch in the living room and looked up from his laptop when I began searching the cabinets for Christmas sweets. "Your mother bought truffles for Emma and Sofia. But they're already wrapped."

"Tell Mom I'm sorry, but Emma needs chocolate," I muttered as I ripped away the gift wrapping around one of the praline boxes. I had to admit taking care of Emma like this made me feel good.

When I finally returned to the bedroom, Emma had put the tray down on the floor and was fast asleep on her side. I put the chocolates beside her on the nightstand in case a nightly craving hit her, then climbed into bed with

her and pressed up to her petite body, breathing in the flowery scent of her hair.

I took another, even deeper breath when my body shivered and called for something to drink. It was an almost physical pull, but I held Emma. She was the reason I was doing this, and she was also why I wouldn’t fail.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Samuel

Three weeks sober and a week as Underboss, today marked the day I'd have to gather all of my strength to resist the need for a drink.

Our newest club was swarming with police officers. On the day of its grand opening, no less. I had gotten a call from the club manager thirty minutes ago and came as quickly as I could. I found him talking to the famous—according to my manager—DJ we had hired for way too much money and a stash of cocaine. I joined them in front of the back entrance where I'd parked my car.

"I can't have bad press," the DJ said.

"You agreed to the job, and you will give people what they want, a fucking amazing show, or the press will be all over the photos of you snorting cocaine from the tits of our best prostitutes."

He paled, then stalked back inside the building. I shook hands with the manager, an ambitious son of one of our Captains. "The mayor is in the front, showing his face for the cameras."

"The police won't find anything."

My manager nodded.

I headed inside, then crossed the huge club past dozens of police officers turning everything over. It would take a lot of manpower to put everything back in place before the opening in six hours. I caught the eyes of two senior officers on our payroll among a few others. They had warned us an hour before the operation so we had time to hide any compromising material. I found the mayor in front of the main entrance of the club, speaking to the press. He was young, very ambitious, and had the looks that could catapult him into much higher political positions if he did it right.

“Mayor,” I said with a hard smile. “This could be considered harassment. Is this because my family supported your opponent in the last election?”

He smoothed his dark blond hair back with a fake smile. “This is me making good on my promise. I told the voters I would clean the streets, and that’s what I’m doing.”

“This is a nightclub. You won’t find anything that’ll make these streets any safer.”

“We’ll see. We both know you aren’t a mere businessman, Mr. Mione, so stop pretending.”

My smile became threatening as I stepped closer to him. “You would know all about pretending, wouldn’t you?” He was a hardliner and propagated traditional family values in a very adamant way, which wasn’t too far from the values the Outfit upheld, but I knew his interest in women was nonexistent. I personally didn’t care if someone fucked guys or women, but I cared about ambitious politicians ruining my business. Something flickered in his eyes, then he gave me a terse smile and glanced at his watch. “I have more important matters to deal with.”

“I’m sure,” I drawled and pushed my hands into my pockets, then watched him drive away. I gritted my teeth and returned to the club.

My manager was at the bar, shaking his head over a few liquor bottles that had shattered on the floor, thanks to careless police officers. I stopped beside him but regretted it immediately when the strong odor of bourbon and martini wafted into my nose.

“I need a drink, what about you?” he asked.

I stiffened and shook my head. My phone rang at that moment, and I picked up. “There’s a big fight between Made Men in my grandparents’ restaurant,” Renato said.

“I’ll head there.”

It was only a ten-minute drive from where I was. “Make sure everything is ready for tonight,” I told the manager before I left the club. I’d have to discuss with Dad how to keep the mayor in check. I didn’t want him to start investigating more.

When I pulled up in front of the Cantina, one of the front windows was broken, and I could hear screams and shooting inside. I pulled my own gun. I hadn’t thought it was this serious. Dammit, what was going on?

I ducked my head and ran toward the front door, then peered in. Two of my soldiers were caught in a shooting match, one hidden behind the bar, the other behind an overturned table. I could see Renato’s grandfather peering out of the kitchen, a gun in hand.

“Put your weapons down now!” I ordered. “It’s me, Samuel.”

Another shot was fired from behind the bar. “He fucked my wife!” The voice sounded raspy and weak.

“Weapons down! That’s a fucking order.”

The soldier behind the table tossed his gun to the center. Then nothing. I slowly walked inside as Renato’s grandfather stepped out and looked at something behind the bar. He bent down, then straightened and shook his head.

“Fuck.”

I stalked toward the guy behind the table and dragged him to his feet, but he moaned and clutched his bleeding side. “Call our doctor,” I shouted.

Renato’s grandfather picked up his phone.

“What the fuck happened here?”

He winced, holding his side. “I slept with his wife, and he found out. I came here to grab dinner for my family before the restaurant opened, and he cornered me.”

I pushed him down on a chair with force. “I suppose your wife doesn’t know you fucked around.”

He shook his head, paling more as he lost more blood. I headed around the bar where the other man had bled out from two shot wounds to his belly. I looked around. Two windows were broken, glass was everywhere, and several tables were ruined. The restaurant wouldn’t open tonight. I didn’t need word about this to spread. The mayor might try to use it against us until I’d figured out a safe way to get him under control.

“Thanks for coming,” Renato’s grandfather said and handed me a bottle of vintage Brunello, one of my favorites. I took it, then called our cleanup crew and headed back to my car. I put the bottle down on the passenger seat.

I really wanted a drink.

Emma wasn’t home yet. She was with Giorgia. She wouldn’t find out if I had a drink if I showered and brushed my teeth.

I started the car and gave the club manager another call to ask how things were going—too slow—and then I called Renato to tell him his grandparents were okay, but the restaurant wasn’t. After that, I drove to the dead soldier’s family. His wife cried over his death, and maybe it wasn’t even fake. His three kids were definitely distraught. I hated being the harbinger of bad news like that, especially when my own men were responsible for a death. I’d have to figure out how to punish the surviving soldier. He too had kids.

When I arrived home, I stayed in the car for a while, debating if I should take the wine bottle with me. I messaged Emma.

I got my favorite wine as a gift today.

It was only a small part of the story, but I knew it was enough.

Immediately, Emma’s name flashed across my screen. I took a deep breath. I shouldn’t have disturbed her. Now she’d feel obligated to return home early. I picked it up.

“I’ll be home in thirty minutes,” she said. She probably wasn’t alone.

“It’s fine. You don’t have to rush. I’ve been alone with the bottle for a while now.” My voice sounded relaxed and certain, but my insides craved that wine.

“I know it’s going to be fine.” Emma too sounded sure. I wondered if she was. “But I’ll be home soon. I’m tired.”

I hung up and grabbed the bottle, then walked into the house. I could hear pots clinking in the kitchen, but I walked straight to my office, grabbed a glass and a bottle opener, then sat on the armchair in front of the fireplace. The familiar scent of berries and tannins flooded my nose as I poured myself a generous glass. I watched the dark red liquid and whirled it around in the glass so it could breathe and really develop its aroma.

Would a drink get rid of my problems with the mayor? No. Would it help me find a just punishment for the cheating soldier? No.

But it would surely make it seem that way for a little while.

I found Samuel in his office, sitting in his armchair in a half-unbuttoned shirt and swirling a dark red liquid in a wineglass. His jacket and tie lay discarded on the hardwood floor. His blond brows pulled together as he regarded the alcohol in the glass. I stopped in the doorway, waiting for him to look up, but he didn't, only kept staring at the glass.

"Today was a shitty day. A police raid in one of our clubs because the new mayor wants to show us who's boss." He smiled grimly as if the mayor would learn soon enough that it wasn't him. "A fight among Made Men because one slept with the wife of another. One guy dead, the other badly injured, of course the one who stole the woman. Now I need to decide what to do with him. They both have young children." He finally looked up.

"Sounds stressful," I said softly, gliding closer until I came to a stop before him. I motioned at the wineglass, my belly tightening in apprehension. Samuel had fought so hard these past three weeks. This would set him back. I glanced at the bottle beside him on the small table. It was still mostly full except for the wine in his glass. "And is it helping?"

He chuckled darkly and finally set the glass down on the small side table and took my hand instead. He kissed my palm, the hint of stubble

tickling my skin. “Never, and I didn’t drink anything.”

I gave him a questioning look.

He leaned forward and kissed my lips, maybe so I could confirm that he didn’t smell of alcohol or spearmint. “I wanted to, believe me. It was a gift from the restaurant manager, Renato’s grandfather. I fucking wanted that drink after this long day, but even more than that, I wanted to be stronger than a goddamn drink. I wanted to win against the need to drink. I think I’ve been staring at the wine for close to an hour before you arrived.”

“You didn’t drink. That’s all that matters,” I said. I knew more battles would follow. Most of them would get easier over time, some not.

“Yeah,” he murmured in a low voice, leaning forward and pulling me closer. He brought my arm to his mouth and dragged his lips over the sensitive spot on my wrist. I bit my lip when the sensation traveled up my arm and through my entire body until the tingling settled between my legs.

“The only thing that really helps after a day like this is you,” he continued, his lips traveling higher and his tongue darting out to taste my skin.

Goose bumps erupted all over my body, and my nipples pebbled against the lace of my bra, becoming very apparent through my thin silk blouse. Samuel hummed, his eyes registering my body’s reaction to his touch. And I wasn’t the only one who was affected. A tent was slowly building in his pants.

Samuel grabbed me by the hips and hoisted me on his lap. His growing erection pressed against my butt in an unmistakable way. His lips returned to their discovery of my body, now stroking along my shoulder. He unbuttoned my blouse with steady fingers and slid it off my body, then hooked a finger in my bra strap and slowly pulled it down, laying one breast bare. My nipple was hard and lusting for attention, but Samuel’s lips dragged over my collarbone, and his fingertips simply stroked along my arm. My breast tightened even more, and the accompanying tugging between my legs made me shift so his cock pressed against the spot that ached for attention. “Samuel,” I whispered softly. “Touch me.”

Samuel’s lips brushed across my neck, but his hand cupped my naked breast, finally. I arched into the touch, and Samuel took one pebbled nipple between his fingers and twirled it gently. His skin rubbing along my sensitive nub sent a shiver down my body, and the skin of my breasts

became almost painfully tight. Finally, his mouth reached mine, and I immediately kissed him. He growled against my mouth, and his fingers on my breast tugged my nipples a bit harder. Our tongues brushed, our pants mingling. I wrapped my arm around Samuel's neck, bringing us closer. His hand left my breast and stroked along my bare belly, following the dip between my legs to the hem of my skirt. He inched it up, his fingertips raking along my inner thigh until they arrived at my pussy.

Samuel groaned when his fingertips brushed my soaked folds under my lace panties. "Your panties have to go."

I smiled against his mouth, my cheeks becoming warm. "You say that every day so maybe I should stop wearing any."

Samuel growled low in his throat. "While the thought is very tempting," he rumbled against my neck, his finger rubbing my clit lightly. "I don't want to risk anyone seeing *my* pussy."

"Your pussy, hmm?"

"Only my pussy," Samuel said as he rubbed me harder, making me moan deeply.

"Mm-hmm," Samuel rasped as he slowly pushed his middle finger into me. I clung harder to him, panting against his cheek. I kissed it as he began to finger me leisurely. He used his other hand to hold my skirt up so he could see his finger sliding into me. It glistened with my arousal, and soon, his knuckles did too. I'd been so worried about not getting wet enough before I'd been with Samuel, but he always got me so aroused that that concern seemed ridiculous now.

He added another finger but kept up the slow rhythm, allowing me to savor the sensual stroking of my inner walls. He began to curl his fingers when they were deep inside me, brushing a spot that made me clench every time he touched it.

"More," I gasped against his lips. Samuel pulled out his fingers, to my disappointment. He stood with me in his arms and put me in the armchair before he got out of his shirt, revealing his six-pack and a myriad of scars.

I dragged my eyes over his body, my mouth practically running dry when I unbuckled his belt and pulled down his zipper, then slowly pulled down his pants and briefs. His erection bobbed out, hard and glistening at the tip. I immediately leaned forward, grabbed it, and took it into my mouth.

Samuel hissed, grabbing my head. “God, Emma. While this feels like heaven, this isn’t what I had in mind right now.”

I pulled back, raising my eyebrows. “No?” A teasing smile pulled at my mouth.

Samuel groaned, stroking my head. He didn’t stop me when I sucked him into my mouth again and took care of him for a while. Eventually, he gently pushed me back. He picked me up again and settled back on the armchair. I gave him a curious look, wondering what he had in mind. We hadn’t tried me being on top yet, for obvious reasons. I couldn’t support myself with my legs, but I trusted Samuel. He’d know what to do and would make sure not to put me in an uncomfortable position. Samuel leaned back until I lay with my back against his stomach. He put his feet down on the ground for leverage, then lined his cock up with my pussy and entered me by shifting his hips upward.

I moaned deeply as he filled me completely. This position didn’t allow as deep penetration as some others, but I loved being pressed up to Samuel, and it was more comfortable for me with my belly. Samuel hooked my legs over the armrest and wrapped his arms around me as he claimed me slowly.

I tilted my head to the side until our mouths found each other.

Before we had dinner, Samuel dumped the wine in the sink. I was proud of him for resisting despite being faced with temptation.

Later in bed, when I lay in his arms, I told him as much.

He kissed my temple. “It’s nothing.”

“But it is. It takes enormous strength. I’m really proud of you.”

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EPILOGUE

My doctor pursed her lips. “Due to the nature of your injuries, you probably won’t feel labor pains the same way as someone without them does. You might feel them only one-sided or not at all, though I don’t think the latter will be the case.”

“But I will know when I’m in labor, right?”

“I’m sure you’ll feel something as you’re not a paraplegic. But there is still the option that your womb can’t produce contractions at all, which is why I’d recommend a C-section.”

I nodded, trying to assure myself that it would be fine. I didn’t want a C-section. I had endured so many surgeries in my life. I didn’t want to have to go through one again unless necessary. “And I will be able to push the baby out? To give birth naturally?”

“At this point, I can’t give you a definite answer. The risk of complications would definitely decrease if you opted for a C-section.”

“So you think it’s safer for the baby?”

She nodded. I sighed, then glanced at Samuel, who had simply listened. I knew he was in favor of a C-section because he worried for the baby’s and

my safety, but he wanted me to decide.

“It’s your decision.”

“If this is about you being scared of witnessing the C-section, there’s still the option of anesthesia.”

I hated feeling helpless, so that wasn’t an option. Despite my anxiety, I agreed to have a C-section two weeks before my due date.

I woke up, not sure why. Something felt off. I blinked into the dark, listening to Samuel’s reassuring breathing beside mine, glad for his presence. Glad that the days I’d find him in his office drunk in the middle of the night were over.

I pushed myself to the edge of the bed, then froze because the sheets were wet. I swallowed. Has my water broken? “Samuel,” I whispered.

He stirred immediately, and the bed shifted. “Hmm?”

“I think my water broke.”

The lights came on at once. It took me a few heartbeats before I saw Samuel. Then I glanced down. The sheets were definitely wet.

I touched my belly. It was very hard. I didn’t feel what I’d consider labor pains, more a sort of strong cramping and pressure.

“Are you in labor?”

I listened into my body, searching for signs. I felt full. As if I needed to go to the toilet for a shit. “I feel pressure. It’s bearing down.”

“Okay.” Samuel frowned. “Let’s go to the hospital.”

I hesitated. It was still seventeen days until my due date. I didn’t want to appear like a hysterical first-time mother who went to the hospital because she ate something wrong.

Samuel reached for his phone. “Then I’ll call my mother. She’ll know what to do.”

“It’s the middle of the night!”

Samuel ignored my comment and put the phone to his ear. “Sorry for waking you, but Emma’s feeling off. Her water broke, and she feels pressure, but she isn’t in labor yet.”

I bit my lip, suddenly unsure. I touched my belly again. It felt as if it was smaller and hung lower. Was I imagining things?

The cramps definitely got worse.

Samuel nodded. “My mother’s on her way. She thinks we should go to the hospital.”

I pulled my wheelchair closer. “Let me go to the toilet.” I rolled into our bathroom, but following my intuition, I reached between my legs and froze. Something was off. I pushed two fingers into me and swallowed. I felt hair. I jerked my hand back. “Samuel!” I shouted.

He staggered inside, a shirt half pulled down his chest. “What?”

“I feel the head.”

Samuel stared at me blankly, searching the top of my head, then his eyes widened, and his gaze dropped to my crotch. My nightgown was covering everything.

“Samuel? Emma?” Ines called from downstairs.

“Mom! The baby is almost out!” Samuel shouted.

Ines rushed in a few seconds later, her eyes wide.

“I could feel hair when I felt for it,” I said, feeling completely overwhelmed.

Ines nodded, then motioned to Samuel. “Call an ambulance immediately. Your father is downstairs.”

Ines touched my shoulder. “Come on, Emma, let’s get you comfortable.”

I allowed her to push my wheelchair toward the bed. “What if the baby’s stuck in the birth canal? What if it’s been stuck for a while? What if it can’t breathe?” Fear choked me. I didn’t even know if it was a boy or a girl. I wanted to be surprised.

“Everything’s going to be fine.”

Soon, sirens sounded close by. Samuel disappeared to let the paramedics in.

Everything else was a rush. I was lifted on a stretcher, and we managed to reach the hospital in time. We arrived in the delivery room, and a midwife touched my shoulder before she took her position between my

legs. When our baby's rhythmic heartbeat sounded, I breathed a sigh of relief. "Explain to me what exactly you're feeling."

"I feel pressure down there as if I need to go to the toilet."

"Can you give in to the pressure just like you would when you go to the toilet?"

I nodded, and suddenly, the pain increased drastically. What had been an intense, uncomfortable pressure before became hard to tolerate.

"Now?"

I did. The pressure shifted, but continued and so did the pain. "Good, pause."

I stopped.

Samuel held my hand, looking disheveled and concerned. "Is everything okay?"

The midwife didn't look away from me but nodded. "We're in the home stretch."

I almost laughed at her wording, but then she said, "Again."

And I tried to allow the pressure once more despite the intense pain. This went on for a while until I felt like I couldn't go on anymore. "The head's out! Give me your hand."

I gave her my hand, and she put it on a small head. I swallowed, completely stunned.

"Ready for another push?"

I nodded even though I wasn't. This time, the pressure lessened considerably, and suddenly, the midwife put a baby on my chest. I stared down at the small human, then at Samuel, unable to believe that I'd given birth. And then I began crying, impossibly grateful for what my body had accomplished, how far it had taken me, and what kind of gift it had just given me. I'd never hate it again for small mishaps, not after the miracle it had just granted me.

I touched my baby and kissed its head. Samuel rubbed my back, his face alight with awe.

"What is it?" I whispered after a while. Samuel seemed to have forgotten all about finding out the gender of our baby. The midwife smiled and showed us. "A little boy."

I sobbed, still completely overwhelmed.

Samuel wrapped an arm around me and kissed my temple. He looked a little dazed too, as if everything had gone too fast, and in some way, it had.

“He was worth fighting for, don’t you think?” I whispered, peering down at our baby.

“I fought for you and him because you both are worth it.” Samuel touched his forehead to mine. “I’m so glad you pushed me so hard. I would have never forgiven myself if something had happened to either of you because I wasn’t strong enough to resist.”

“It’s the past. This is our future.” I stroked our son’s tiny head. “Sergio Mione.”

When Emma finally fell asleep with Sergio on her chest, I picked up my phone and called Danilo. He picked up after the second ring. “Samuel.”

The word was clipped. He was still pissed at me for the accident. “Emma gave birth to a son.”

Silence. “Is she okay? How is he? Are they in the hospital?”

“They’re both asleep, but he’s perfectly healthy, and Emma is exhausted but happy. I thought you’d want to know.”

“Thanks for giving me a call,” Danilo said.

“I’ll send you a couple of photos. Will you and Sofia visit soon?”

“I’m looking at flights as we speak. I could book one for tomorrow.”

“Then take that one. You should meet your nephew.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” He cleared his throat. “See you then.”

His voice was almost friendly. Maybe he and I would find a way to start over.

I picked five of the fifty photos plus a video I had taken and sent them to Danilo, Sofia, Giorgia, my parents, and Emma’s mother, then I hesitated.

“You look sad,” Emma whispered, startling me.

She gave me a tired smile.

“Not sad. A little wistful, perhaps.”

“Why?”

“I just sent our families and Giorgia a few photos, and I realized one person was missing.”

“Serafina.”

I nodded.

I hadn’t messaged her in almost a year, but I realized that I didn’t want to strike her out of my life completely.

“Send her a message. I’m sure she’d love to see Sergio.”

I nodded. She would be happy for me. She had kept writing me even though I never replied. I picked a few photos that didn’t give any hints to our exact whereabouts, then sent them to my twin.

To my surprise, she came online almost instantly and replied.

Oh Sam. He looks like you as a baby. I’m so happy for you.

Emma took my hand and squeezed. After a moment, I put my phone aside. I’d message Fina again later. Right now, I wanted to focus on my wife and son.

Emma’s eyelids fluttered again.

“Sleep. I’ll keep watch.”

Emma nodded, her lids drooping.

Once again, I was in awe of my wife as I watched her hold our son. I was overwhelmed with gratitude and happiness, and also with a lot of smugness because Emma giving me an heir would piss off all the gossip girls who thought she was a bad deal when I married her. I would have still worshipped her—even if she hadn’t been able to do so, something these ignorant scarecrows would never understand—but flaunting our happiness in their faces would definitely be very satisfying.

Emma had always taken their rumors and tasteless comments with dignity, not deigning them with a reaction. I'd often wanted to lash out at them and still wanted to, but I knew it wasn't what Emma wanted. She was too classy and way better than any of them.

They didn't bother looking past her wheelchair. Fools. In the very beginning, before I'd gotten to know her, I'd definitely shared some of their ignorance.

Now I only saw Emma, the woman who'd helped me claw my way out of a dark place where I'd started feeling way too at home. The woman who'd stood by me with love and patience even when I failed, even when I lied to her to hide my failing.

The people who only saw her wheelchair, who thought that piece of metal defined who she was and told them anything about her as a person, I pitied them because they missed out.

Emma was the strongest human I'd ever met. She fought her battles with grace, a trait I was still trying to adopt but often failed at. She was a survivor, and it showed every day. She'd taught me how to be one too, how to survive guilt and addiction and come out stronger.

Emma and our son looked peaceful in sleep, and I too felt at peace at that moment.

I didn't believe in fate, but there was no other explanation for what had happened. I knew with certainty that Emma was the perfect woman for me, the only woman who could have helped me the way Emma did.

She was my fate, and every dark moment of my life had led me to her, which was why I could finally make peace with my past.

I kissed her hand that I was still holding. I had arrived in the present. Finally.

THE END

Thank you so much for reading *A Touch of Fate*. I know many of you have been waiting for this book for many years, and I can't express how much it means to me to finally be able to share it with you. I'd be grateful if you could leave an honest review for Emma and Samuel's story!

Lots of love,

Cora

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cora is the *USA Today* and International Bestselling author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles, and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. She likes her men like her martinis—dirty and strong. Her books have been translated into eighteen languages.

Cora lives in Germany with her young daughter and son, a cute but crazy Bearded Collie, as well as the cute but crazy man at her side. When she doesn't spend her days dreaming up sexy books, she plans her next travel adventure or cooks too spicy dishes from all over the world.

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